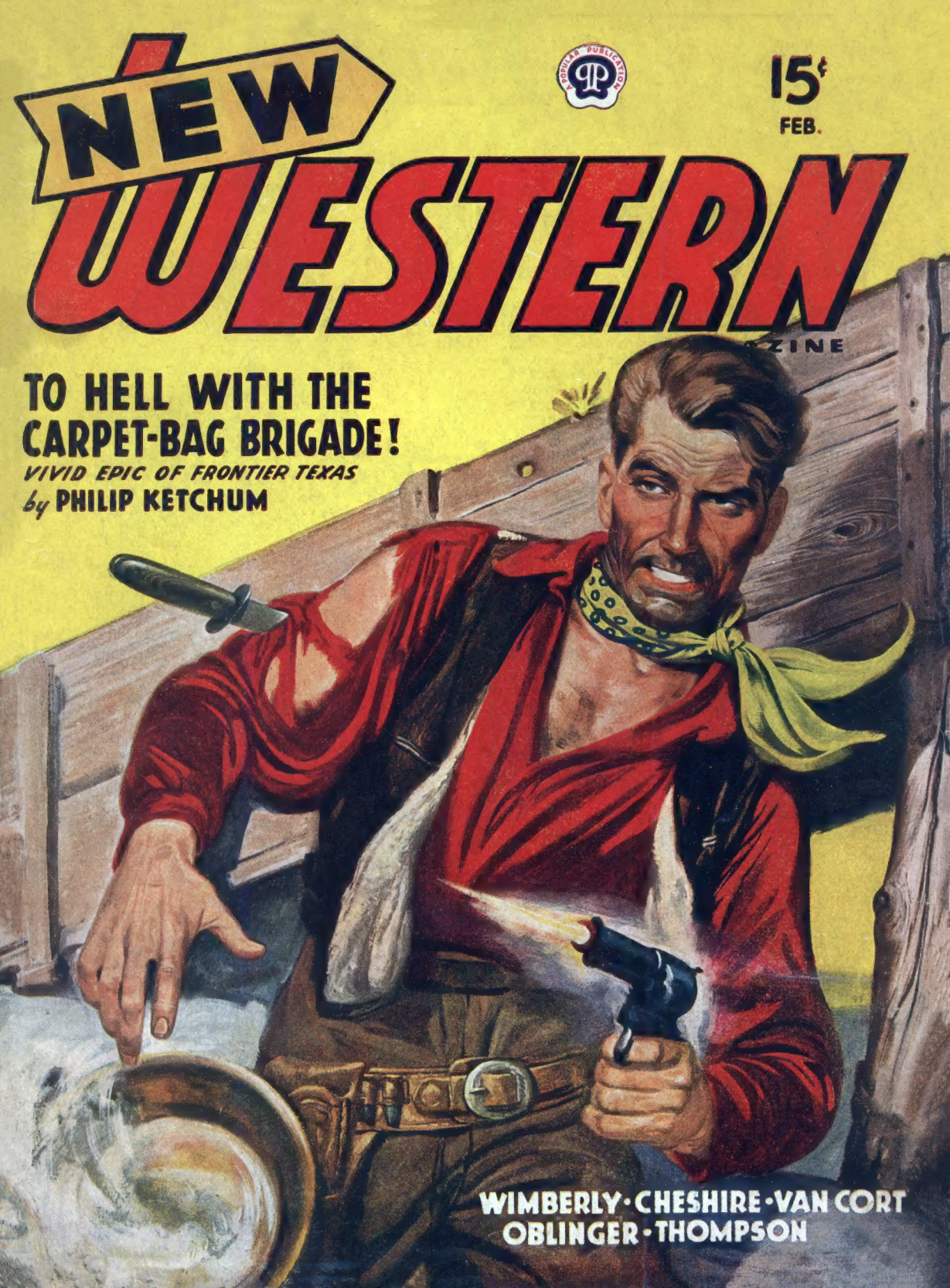
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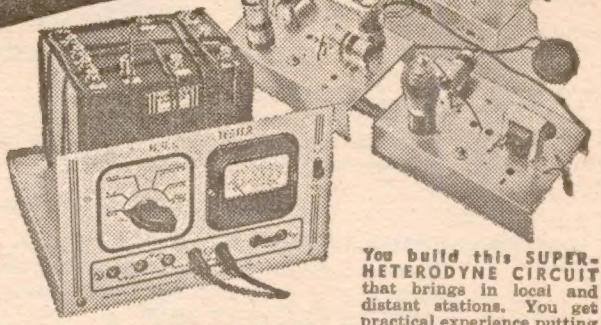

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PUBLISHED JANUARY 25

Published monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a division of Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter January 9, 1941, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1945 by Fictioneers, Inc. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. All rights reserved under Pan American copyright convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscriptions in the U.S.A. (12 issues) $1.80. Additional foreign postage 75c

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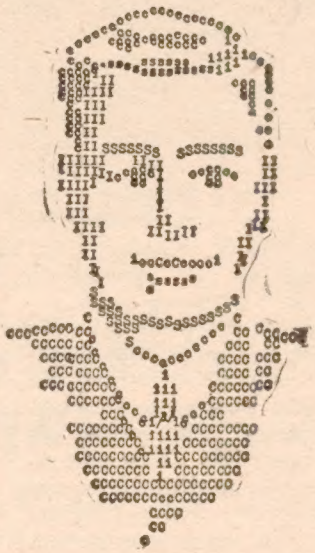

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DISCOUNT TO DISCHARGED VETERANS—SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

★ THE STRAWBOSS ★

TO OUR desk this month came a much-creased newspaper clipping torn from the sunburnt pages of a Texas weekly. In fine print, it was the legal notice of a local court decision, recounting in dull, dry language the mandate of a county judge. It was the final chapter in a long, bitter lawsuit over a ranch owner's will.

It was the final chapter, too, of a Panhandle love story that began some seventy years ago. Cowboys of the old West rarely married and settled down, or when they did, they ceased to be cowboys. The cowpoke led a lonely life and punching cattle was never a steady job. But this case history records that one Texas cowhand did fall in love and settle down with his bride on as nice a piece of cattle land as you'd want to see. Even today, a purling stream runs deep all year through the land, and the grass is high and sweet.

The bride, however, was a nester's daughter. She had no doubts about her Texan, but she insisted on waiting until a circuit-riding sky pilot came through to perform the wedding. The couple waited half a year, impatiently. That part of Texas they had virtually to themselves; there was little through traffic and a preacher never appeared. Nor was there even a civil officer available.

So the cowboy bridegroom got together with the fifteen men—all who lived within the county limits—and elected one of them a Justice of the Peace. The new J. P. then announced that he would perform the wedding ceremony. A day was set.

The couple met under a cottonwood tree. The Justice stretched out his hand for a Bible. "Where's the Book?" he asked expectantly.

There was a dead silence. Then the Texas bridegroom sheepishly handed a fat, battered volume from his pocket. "Reckon this is about the only book in this here whole country," he said. The J. P. looked at it doubtfully. It was a brand book.

And thus a brand book replaced the Bible in that Texas wedding under the cottonwoods—the J. P. devised a "branding" ceremony that sounded fine to everyone. The cowboy "put his brand" on his bride and the two were "ever after hitched to run in double harness."

No one ever questioned the validity of that marriage—until a slick Chicago lawyer, and some distant relatives of the bridegroom, came down into Texas five years ago—long after the original couple had passed to their hard earned reward—and tried to toss their sturdy grandson off the ranch on the grounds that the brand book marriage was illegal.

And it was, we guess. Anywhere but in that tough old Panhandle county, the sincere good will and honest faith of that long-ago union would have stood for nothing before the rockbound interpretation of the law. But in the West, justice has a way of breaking through to light in spite of all the complications of the law. Last week, in a brief decision, a judge opined that the pioneer marriage by the brand book was as good, in the eyes of Texas, and as blessed by God, as though a string of sky pilots, and the governor himself, had joined the couple in matrimony!

That Texas jurist sure knew his frontiersmen. He knew that those sturdy pioneers would have sooner faced a smoking sixgun battery than to have gone back on a given word. To the Westerner, his word was truly his bond. We of *New Western* try to give you a bird's-eye view of their story, with all its struggles and heartbreak, its flaming courage, its joys and sorrows, its deathless heroism.

The March issue will be published January 25th!

—The Editor

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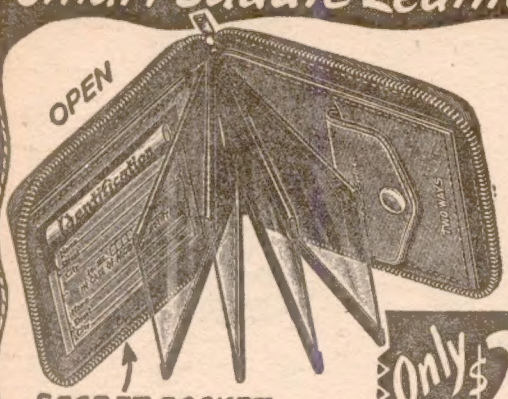

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HOT LEAD and PIGTAILS

By JHAN ROBBINS

The usually happy, easy-going philosophy of Virginia City's hard-working Chinese had stretched to the breaking point. . . . It was to be open warfare!

ALDER GULCH, the location of Virginia City, Montana, was the scene of many a public and private disagreement that ended with an exchange of gunfire, but there was only one that burst forth into organized battle. It was known as the Chinese War.

The war was an outbreak between two rival tongs. The usually calm temper and happy, easy-going philosophy of the Chinese laborer was stretched to the breaking point in the mining camps. Socially ostracized, segregated as though they were sub-human, they were shamelessly used by their white employers and at the same time hated by their fellow white laborers because of their willingness to work for low wages. Seeking a way out, they organized among themselves, and the tongs came into being.

But even here, the seeds of strife and discontent followed. Defeated in early attempts to work together to get white man's justice for the yellow laborer, the tongs turned to vicious inter-city quarrels and, in Virginia City, a series of private feuds broke almost spontaneously into open warfare.

Suddenly the mining town was full of armed Chinese, abandoning the laundries and mine shafts to gather on the double-quick in the middle of Virginia City.

Fearing a race riot, white men and women barricaded their doors at the sight of the rifle-toting Chinese, but no white man was offered any harm. Hastily, the two converging armies threw up a breast-high mound across the center of the street. The two forces drew up facing one another, then flung themselves down and began shooting.

The roar of gunfire was heard miles away. It swelled to a crescendo that indicated tremendous slaughter was taking place. Cautiously, about noon, a few white men slipped into the central square to get a first hand view of the blood and bodies. They saw nothing of either. They further reported that most of the battling Chinese seemed to be firing into the air, enjoying the noise.

At the end of the day, many rounds of bullets had whizzed back and forth, but at nightfall the armies flung down their rifles and stopped shooting, as though by some pre-arranged signal.

Two hours after sundown, the tongs concluded a formal armistice. And then, as the moon shone down upon the city, the battlefield began to blossom with pink lanterns, tiny Chinese lutes began to strum. Smoke-blackened riflemen returned home to reappear a short while later in colorful robes and begin a sumptuous and friendly feast of reconciliation.

At the end of the deadly Chinese War of the tongs, two Chinamen lay dead . . and these had been knifed to death.

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $2,000 to $10,000?

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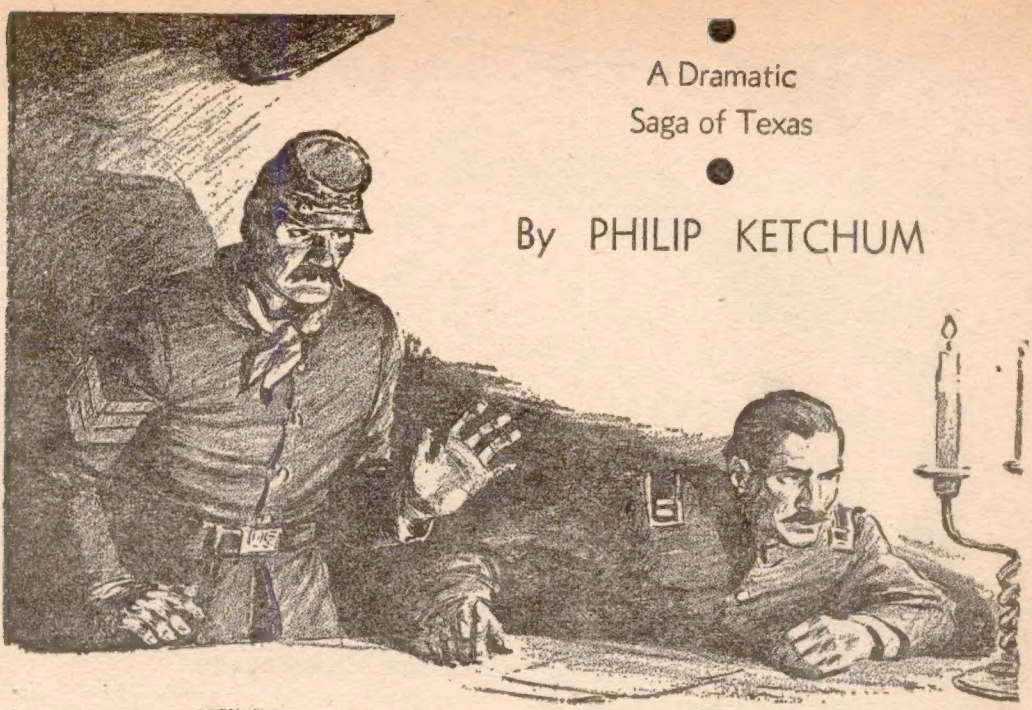
A Dramatic
Saga of Texas

By PHILIP KETCHUM



A defeated Confederacy had sadly laid its arms to rest, and the long war had ended. . . . But for Llano, Texas, the bugle call was yet to sound—summoning a gallant band of die-hards who were ready to follow their daring leader through blazing guns, and onto a second Alamo!

CHAPTER ONE

Llano Be Damned!

A FEW months before, at Appomattox, the soldiers of the Confederacy had laid down their arms and the war between the states had ended. Now, those who had fought through the four long and bitter years were beginning to drift home, but home was not as they remembered it. The land was impoverished. Many of the military rules that had been established were harsh and unjust. Former slaves who had been declared free men were bewildered at their freedom and were the easy dupes of unscrupulous politicians. A bloody reign of terror lay ahead.

In Washington, the men charged with guiding the destiny of a nation struggled

TO HELL WITH THE CARPET-BAG BRIGADE!

"This gun shoots quite easily. Please don't call for your men."

with unfamiliar problems, seeking some pattern with which to weld the people together again. Most of those men in Washington were men of vision who looked unselfishly toward the future. A few were men interested only in themselves and what they could achieve for themselves.

John Bainbridge was of the latter group. Before the war he had owned a small supply house but large government contracts had made him wealthy and powerful and had finally bought him a place of influence.

Bainbridge had the necessary combination. He was well educated, clever and resourceful. There was a spark of daring and imagination in his make-up. At first he considered the southern states and what to do with them and how to best use them for his own purpose. Then he turned his attention to the west. Regardless of what happened to the south, the future of this nation, he knew, lay in its westward expansion. There were roads and railroads to be built across the prairies and mountains. There were telegraph wires to be stretched between the new towns which would grow up. There was gold in the distant mountains. An empire was in the making west of the Mississippi, an empire which might easily be controlled by a farseeing man!

John Bainbridge knew from experience how power could be built up, how power could grow. Its start was always in the control of one important factor. Control that one important factor and a man's control could spread to others. There would finally be no way to stop it. And in considering the whole picture of the westward expansion, Bainbridge thought first of Texas and the thousands upon thousands of cattle still roaming the Texas plains. There had been recent talk of driving these cattle north to Kansas from where they could be shipped by rail to the east.

If such drives were possible, out in Kansas would be the first great markets of an expanding country.

Here then, was his opening move. And to make certain of the control of the market all he had to do was to control the supply from Texas. That shouldn't be too hard. Texas was a conquered state and was at the mercy of government mandates. He had money enough to begin, he had influential friends, and he knew of a man to head up the actual work, a man without too many scruples. Yes, Hugh Conroy would be just the man.

ON Saturdays it was Dan Rossiter's custom to ride into the town of Llano, where he would transact whatever business was necessary in connection with his ranch. By leaving early Saturday morning he could make it to Llano before dusk. The one decent room in the Llano House was always held for him. Before he would check in he would have a leisurely drink at the Lone Star bar.

This was a habit pattern of many years standing and like other habits of Dan Rossiter's, was fixed and certain. He was not a quick man to make decisions. He liked to consider all sides of an issue. It was said of him that he tried to be fair and that he was usually right. But right or wrong, when Dan Rossiter made up his mind his decision was seldom changed.

In this year, 1866, Dan Rossiter was forty-eight, but most men thought him younger. He stood a little under average size, wide, sloping shoulders, long arms, a flat stomach and thick, sturdy legs. His hair was beginning to gray at the sides. It had been dark black when he had come to Texas at the age of eighteen and when he had fought at San Jacinto with Sam Houston. It had stayed black through the turbulent years which had followed. Only recently and as the war between the states had dragged on, had men begun to notice the change in color.

Two years before someone had said, half jokingly, that Dan Rossiter was beginning to break, but there was no other sign of it. His eyes were still clear and sharp and the skin on his face was tight drawn and showed no sagging wrinkles.

On this Saturday evening as he rode into Llano he wore his usual attire for town trips, dark trousers and a dark coat, boots which caught the trousers, and a tan shirt and black tie. His hat was high crowned and broad brimmed and was also black. Around his waist was buckled his gun-belt and at his hip hung his gun weighted holster. Dan Rossiter had never been seen without his gun.

The day had been hot. There had been no wind and there was no sign of any early this evening when Dan rode his horse down the main and only street and pulled up in front of the Davenport corral. Old Tom Davenport came out to greet him and reached for the reins as Dan swung to the ground. Davenport was getting pretty old. But he was still as much of a gossip as usual. If there was anything out of the ordinary going on, Dan usually heard first from Davenport.

"Bunch of folks in town who ain't never been here before," he whispered to Rossiter. "They ain't never been in Texas before, either, is what I'd guess."

"That so?" Dan asked.

"Yep. They act like damn Yankees, but I ain't so sure of that, either."

"How many, Tom?"

"Four of 'em. They rode in yesterday. Took rooms at the Llano House. Took your room, too, from what I heard. They told Ollie Brooks to hell with you. Said you could find a room someplace else. They're a mean lookin' crowd."

Dan frowned. He felt rather annoyed at the thought of not having his customary room but he wasn't much surprised that Ollie Brooks hadn't kicked up a fuss. Ollie was a mild-mannered man who didn't like any unpleasantness.

The long ride in from the ranch had settled a heavy film of dust over his coat and

trousers. Dan took off his coat and shook it and brushed his trousers and then made a casual examination of his gun. It was a heavy, single-action Colt. He slid it back in its holster and put his coat on again.

"Take care of Patches for me. Will you, Tom?" he asked slowly.

"Ain't I always taken care of him?" Tom Davenport demanded.

DAN turned and looked up the street. Llano wasn't much of a town. In all, there were less than a dozen business establishments facing each other across a wide, dusty road. Back of these buildings were a few houses. That was all there was to Llano, Texas. Still, it was the only town for almost fifty miles in any direction and just as when he had founded it, Dan Rossiter had a notion that someday it would be a great city.

The Lone Star Bar was across the street and beyond it the Llano House and the Texas Grocery, a blacksmith shop and another saloon. On this side of the street was Fred's feed store, the Llano bank, two more buildings and then the Willow restaurant. A faint smile touched Dan's lips as his eyes caught the restaurant sign. Kate Randolph ran the restaurant. It would be good to see Kate again.

Harry Ward came out of the Lone Star bar, glanced across at Dan, waved a greeting, and then turned back inside the saloon again.

Dan Rossiter frowned again. It was unlike Harry Ward not to wait for him. Still puzzling over the way Harry Ward had acted, Dan crossed the street, his feet kicking up puffs of gray dust. He pushed open the door of the saloon. Harry Ward was leaning against the bar, and Fred Latham, who ran the feed store, was near him. Two Mexican range riders were at the other end of the bar. At one of the two tables in the room sat four strange men. It was too dark in the room to catch more than a glimpse of them as he angled toward the door, but Dan was aware that all four were watching him.

Big Pete Meyers, who ran the saloon, was back of the bar. Big Pete was always jovial and equal to any occasion. It was customary for him to boom out a welcome when Dan came in, but he was silent this evening and looked a little worried.

Dan leaned against the bar.

"Hi'yu, Pete. A little of the usual," he said.

Big Pete reached under the bar for Dan's bottle and poured a generous drink. At that moment a heavy built man stepped up to Dan's side.

"Special bottle, huh?" the stranger said gruffly. "I reckon I'll have a little of that myself."

Big Pete stiffened, his hand tightening on the neck of the bottle until Dan could see the whites of his knuckles. He took a quick glance at Dan.

"Pour the gentleman a drink," Dan said quietly. And then turning, he looked at the man. "It's in no sense a special bottle," he added. "It just happens that I like sour mash whisky and most folks around here don't. You're welcome to all you can pay for—"

The man standing at Dan's side was tall and broad shouldered with a deeply tanned face. His eyes were dark and sharp and there was the thin line of a scar across one cheek. He wore a dark suit, a checkered shirt and a string tie. Here was a man, Dan knew, who would appear handsome and exciting to women but whom men would instinctively distrust.

The man reached for the drink Big Pete had poured and if he was disappointed at not having started an argument, he didn't show it.

"Your health, sir," Dan said quietly, lifting his own drink.

THE man drank and then set the glass back on the bar. "I don't think I know you," he stated. "My name's Hugh Conroy. I'm the new United States Commissioner for this district."

Dan Rossiter didn't know what significance that title had. He had heard that the government at Washington was setting up a civil authority supported by a military rule in most of the confederate states, and he had anticipated something of the sort for Texas. He had never expected, however, that either the civil or military authority would extend to a region so sparsely settled as this.

"I didn't catch your name," Conroy said bluntly.

"It's Rossiter," Dan answered.

"Rossiter, huh. You own anything around here?"

Dan Rossiter smiled. He wondered if Conroy was trying to be deliberately insulting, for he was sure the man had known who he was. And he wondered how he should answer the question. What did he own around here, as a matter of fact? There was the ranch, of course, and the cattle, numbering, if recent tallys were correct, more than a hundred thousand. There was the bank here in Llano, which he had started. He had put up the money to start Fred Latham's feed store. He had financed Harry Ward's grocery, had started Ed Randolph in the restaurant business which Kate still ran. There probably wasn't an establishment here in which he hadn't played a major part. He hadn't thought of it in this way before, but if the truth were known, he probably owned Llano, or at least, most of it.

"I asked you a question, Rossiter," Conroy snapped.

Dan Rossiter nodded. "Why yes, I own a few things around here."

Conroy glanced over at Big Pete. "I'll have another drink," he ordered. "One out of that special bottle."

Big Pete looked at Dan and the rancher nodded. Conroy didn't miss this exchange. His lips tightened.

"I've opened an office in the Llano house," he said sharply. "I think I had to take the room you usually use. Too bad, but there wasn't any other."

Dan made no comment.

"I shall expect you there at ten o'clock, Monday."

Dan shook his head. "I'll not be here Monday."

"I think you will, Rossiter!"

Again Dan Rossiter shook his head. "I always leave here early Monday morning for the ranch. You can find it easily. Anyone can tell you the way."

Big Pete Meyers, back of the bar, was grinning and there was a grin on Latham's face, too. Latham was short and fat and round faced. Harry Ward was scowling at the floor. His lips were moving nervously. The two Mexican riders had paid no apparent attention to any of this talk. How the other three men at the table had taken it, Dan didn't know. He hadnt' even glanced at them.

"I said, ten o'clock, Monday," Conroy grated.

"Sorry," Dan said as he turned away.

"You'll be there, Rossiter, or I'll come out to your ranch and drag you in," Conroy threw after him.

Dan made no answer. He reached the door, pulled it open and stepped outside and there he paused and drew in a long, deep breath and fought silently against the anger which was trying to get its grip on him.

CHAPTER TWO

Get Dan Rossiter!

SHADOWS were thickening in the sky as Dan Rossiter turned up the street to the Llano House. As he opened the door Ollie Brooks looked up from his desk. The high, swinging lamp above the desk gave Ollie's thin face a yellowish tinge and at the sight of Dan, the hotel keeper came to his feet. His jaw moved up and down but if he said anything, Dan couldn't hear it.

"I know," Dan nodded. "You couldn't help yourself, could you, Ollie?"

"That's it. That's it, Mr. Rossiter," Ollie managed, and there was obvious relief in his voice. "There wasn't anything I could do."

"What about your other rooms?" Dan asked.

"They took them all, Mr. Rossiter. Even mine. They said there would be more men arriving and they would need them."

There were only eight rooms in the long, single storied hotel. Four men were here. From what Ollie said, four additional men and perhaps more were on their way. Dan scowled. He couldn't understand why so many would be needed in a place as small as this.

"You can find a room with Harry Ward or Fred Latham, I'm sure," Ollie Brooks said hurriedly. "I—I wouldn't have had this happen for anything, Mr. Rossiter. I'll go see about a room for you right away."

Dan shook his head. "I had some stuff in the room."

Ollie stooped down and lifted a handbag from behind the desk. "It's all here, Mr. Rossiter. I packed everything. I—"

Ollie's voice broke off and his eyes went past Dan Rossiter toward the door. His mouth sagged open and some of the color drained out of his face.

Dan took a quick glance over his shoul-

der. A short, heavy-set fellow stood in the open doorway. Dan was sure that this man was one of the three who had been in the saloon with Conroy.

"Thanks for the bag, Ollie," he nodded, and stepping forward he took it from Ollie's hand. Then he started for the door. The man waiting there didn't move. He was a man of about Dan's height. He looked dirty and needed a shave badly. His hair, showing below his hat, was black and shaggy. He had thick lips, a wide, flat nose and his teeth were yellowed from tobacco.

"What's in that bag?" the man demanded as Dan reached the door.

Dan was aware of a returning surge of the anger which he had felt was under such a close control but he still held himself steady.

"Just some personal belongings," he answered curtly.

"Let me see!"

The man held out a hand for the bag.

Dan let loose of the bag and the hand which had held it became a fist and smashed upwards into the man's jaw, straightening the fellow and almost lifting him to his toes. Dan's other fist stabbed at the flattened nose and rocked the man back against the doorjamb. His knees sagged and then folded up and he fell on his face, still in the doorway.

The anger which had exploded in Dan's body still had possession of him. He heard Ollie Brooks gasp something but the words didn't register. He stooped over the man in the doorway, grasped him by the collar and dragged him outside and across the narrow hotel porch. From the edge of the porch he rolled the unconscious man into the street. He then got his bag and crossed over to the Willow restaurant.

AFTER Dan Rossiter left the saloon, Hugh Conroy had a third drink from Dan's bottle, wishing that the bartender would refuse to pour it and a little disappointed when he didn't. He took the drink quickly and then glanced at the two Mexicans. They were jabbering at each other and suddenly they both laughed. Conroy scowled. He wished that he could understand their talk.

"I'm going up to the hotel a minute," said Doc Ellison. He was one of the three

"Easy does it" when you use
The low-priced blade well groomed men choose!
That's Thin Gillette, four for a dime—
It cuts down shaving cost and time!
Made of easy-flexing steel hard enough to cut glass
Gillette
4 for 10¢
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

men Conroy had brought along with him.

Conroy nodded. He moved down along the bar to where Ward and Latham were standing and his eyes fastened on the short, dumpy figure of Fred Latham. He didn't like Fred Latham. He didn't like the way the man stared back at him.

"Get out of here," he said suddenly. "Just looking at you makes me sick."

Latham stiffened and for a moment Conroy thought the man was going to fight. But instead Latham backed away and stumbled toward the door.

Ray Patton and Frenchie Knowles, the other two men who had come to Llano with him and who were still at the table, laughed. Back of the bar, Big Pete Meyers scowled and his hands reached momentarily under the bar counter and rested on the rifle hidden there.

"What'll he do, Ward," Conroy asked. "Dan Rossiter, I mean."

Harry Ward bit his lips. He twisted his hands together. He told himself for perhaps the fiftieth time that he was doing what was right in trying to be of help to these men. After all, they were government officials and it was his duty to help them.

"Well, what'll he do?"

Ward shook his head. "I don't know. Dan Rossiter can be a mighty stubborn man. He's had his own way around here for a long time."

"Those days are over. How many men does he have on his ranch?"

"Fifty Mexicans, I guess. Perhaps more."

Conroy grunted, and immediately forgot about the men on Rossiter's ranch. He would have worried about a dozen Americans but fifty Mexicans seemed unimportant.

He ordered another drink and his scowl deepened as he waited for it. Texas, he had decided when he first saw it, was a terrible country, and Llano must surely be the worst of the lot. He wanted to get this job over as soon as possible. He wanted to get back to a part of the country where a man could live, where there was some excitement, women.

Conroy's eyes narrowed. There was several women in Llano who weren't so bad. That woman who ran the restaurant. And Ellen Ward, the wife of this man standing next to him at the bar, was rather interesting to look at. She seemed a good deal younger than her husband. In fact a man could go a long ways and do a lot worse.

"You want—anything more of me tonight?" Harry Ward asked.

Conroy nodded. He reached for his drink and tossed it off. "Yep, I'll want you again. Stay here until I get back." Then, raising his voice, "Hey, Frenchie. Keep Ward here with you until I return."

It was fairly dark when Conroy stepped outside but there was a light in the grocery store. Conroy headed that way. He looked through the window and saw Ellen Ward. She was rather short, slender and sandy-haired. Hugh Conroy grinned and tapped on the window and then moved over to the door and rattled the knob. He heard the bolt drawn and then the door opened a crack and he saw Ellen's face. She looked startled when she saw who was there and she tried to push the door shut again.

"You can't come in," she was saying. "We're closed. You can't come in!"

Hugh Conroy laughed and pushed on through the door. He closed it and shot the bolt into place.

DAN had his dinner in the kitchen. He noticed that a blanket was over the window and that Kate kept the back door closed though it was insufferably hot, but he offered no comment. There had been several men in the dining-room when he had come in but the last of them had finished now. Dan heard Kate locking the front door and then blowing out the lamps and finally she came back to the kitchen.

She was tall and slender. Her hair was dark brown and she wore it in a coil around her head. She had brown eyes and regular features and she usually stood very straight, though her shoulders sloped a little tonight and there were lines of weariness in her face.

She was thirty-five. Dan had known her for more than ten years. She had come here with her husband, Ed Randolph, who was now away with the army, and Ed's first job had been on Dan's ranch. Ed, however, hadn't been cut out for a rancher and soon had given it up and moved into town, where he had tried various things, none very successfully. And about five years before Dan had set him up in this restaurant. He probably wouldn't have been very suc-

cessful here but the war had come and Ed had almost welcomed it and had been among the first to go. Kate had carried on in the restaurant.

"They're all gone?" Dan asked.

Kate nodded and brushed a hand over her hair. She said, "Finally," and came over and sat down across the table from Dan. Dan got up and poured her a cup of coffee.

For a while there was no more talk. Dan had finished his meal and now was just sitting here as he had many times before. It came to him, suddenly, that he felt very much at home here in Kate's kitchen, and at the same moment he realized that soon, Ed would be coming back from the army and these quiet interludes would be no more. He scowled and shifted uneasily in his chair. He wondered what four years in the army had done to Ed and what Ed's return would mean to Kate.

"You've met them, Dan?" Kate asked. "I mean the four men who rode in here just the other day."

"I've met a man who calls himself Conway. And one other."

"Do you know why they've come here?"

"Conway calls himself a United States Commissioner, whatever that is."

Kate was frowning. "They've been coming here for their meals. I've heard some of their talk. I can't put it all together but they've talked about cattle. I've heard your name mentioned and that of a man named Bainbridge. And talk of troops, too. There are some troups headed this way. Union troops."

"Union troops?" Dan repeated.

"Conway said this morning that if there was any trouble the troops had their orders. That's when he mentioned Bainbridge. Maybe Bainbridge is in charge of the troops."

Dan shrugged his shoulders. The name Bainbridge didn't mean a thing to him.

"I don't like it," Kate said slowly. "I have a feeling that it's you they're after, Dan."

"Men have been after me before, Kate."

"But not men like these. Not men with the power of an army behind them."

Dan shrugged his shoulders. He got to his feet and crossed to the door to the dining-room. Kate came up beside him and he suddenly felt her hand on his arm.

"You'll be careful, Dan," she was saying. "Please don't try to fight this, whatever it is. Keep away from Llano."

Dan Rossiter looked around at the girl and grinned. She had dropped her hand and now he lifted his arm and rested it across her shoulders in an old friendly gesture which was a part of the pattern of the days gone by. But all at once this was no longer just a token of friendship. Dan could feel Kate's shoulders trembling. His arm tightened, though he hadn't meant it to at all. He looked into Kate's eyes and he had never before known that a man could see so deeply into a woman, could read so much.

"Kate," he heard himself saying. "Kate—"

The girl nodded and quite abruptly she was holding him away and then tears came into her eyes and she turned her head away to hide them from him.

"I didn't mean to ever let you know, Dan," Kate told him, and her voice wasn't steady. "Please go. Quickly."

"Knowing how you feel is going to help me Kate," he said slowly. "Don't be sorry you told me. I've needed this for a long time."

Kate still didn't look at him. She said, "Hurry, Dan."

Dan Rossiter reached for the girl's hand and squeezed it and then opened the door to the dining-room and headed for the street door. He let himself outside and pulled the door shut behind him. There was a grin on his face, a foolish looking grin, he knew, but he felt pretty good. He felt young again. He felt equal to anything which could be thrown at him.

CHAPTER THREE

Brand Him Outlaw!

FRED LATHAM lived in a single room back of the feed store. He lived there alone. On the edge of the town there was a three room frame house which he had built almost ten years before and where he had planned to live with Mrs. Latham. When he had built the house there hadn't been any Mrs. Latham, but there had been a girl back in Tennessee. He had never told anyone, why she hadn't come back with him when he had gone to fetch her.

This was wholly characteristic of Fred Latham. He didn't discuss his troubles with anyone. His personal life was a closed book.

In spite of all this, however, Latham was a rather popular man. He could tell a good story and he laughed easily. Whatever had happened back in Tennessee hadn't embittered him.

Latham usually spent the early part of the evening in the Lone Star. He didn't drink much. He sometimes sat in a game of poker but he was an indifferent player. The game had no real attraction for him. What he enjoyed was the companionship, the talk, and the sense of belonging which those evenings gave him.

His thoughts were jumbled when he had stumbled out of the Lone Star. Without knowing where he was going he headed up the street and on out of town. Suddenly he realized that he was hot and perspiring and tired and he slowed down and finally stopped.

There was no place to go for almost a hundred miles in the direction he had been taking. His eyes circled the purple shaded plain. A slight raise hid the lights of Llano. Above, the sky was clear and a million distant stars kept watch. Excepting for the stars and the shadows, there was nothing to see.

He had never thought of himself as a coward. A thousand times, in his mind, he had placed himself in a desperate situation and a thousand times he had met the test. But all of that had been day-dreaming. Suddenly, a little while before, he had come up against reality and his make-believe courage had turned to ashes. He knew what to look forward to now. Before another day had passed everyone in Llano would have heard what had happened in the Lone Star and would know how he had run. There would be no more friendly evenings. This thing would always stand as a ghost at his side. And life, under such circumstances, wasn't worth the price he must pay.

Latham straightened a little, his mind catching hold of that last thought and considering it again and again. Though he was standing his breath began to come a little faster, and easier, and deeper. And then quite suddenly he turned and started back toward town. On the outskirts he had to pass the house he had built for the girl in Tennessee and he paused for a moment and stared at it. Joe Buckler, the blacksmith, lived there now with his family but Latham had forgotten that.

"It's all right, Jewel," he nodded. "You needn't worry."

THERE was a gun in his room back of the feed store but he didn't stop. Moving straight ahead he came to the Lone Star and pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Big Pete was still back of the bar and Harry Ward was leaning against the bar at the far end. The two Mexican riders were gone. The three men who had come to Llano with Hugh Conroy were at their table playing stud. One of them, a short, heavy-set, ugly fellow whom Latham knew by the name of Doc Ellison, was scowling and now and then daubing at his nose with a bloody handkerchief. Conroy wasn't there.

Latham had counted on facing Conroy. He wondered what he ought to do now. Puzzling about this he angled over to the bar, nodded to Big Pete and then shook his head, indicating that he didn't want a drink. A chair at the table behind him scraped back and someone stood up but Latham didn't look around.

"Hey you," said a thick voice at his shoulder. "I thought Conroy told you to keep the hell out of here!"

Latham glanced at the man and saw that it was Doc Ellison who had come up behind him and asked that question. But he made no answer.

A hand fell on Latham's shoulder and twisted him toward the door but Latham suddenly jerked free and swung around toward Ellison and his open hand caught Ellison on the side of the face. It was a stinging slap which tilted Ellison against the bar and which probably surprised him more than it hurt.

"Keep your dirty paws off of me," Latham grated, and the sound and tone of his voice startled him.

There was a momentary hush in the saloon, then, with a half smothered cry, Ellison rushed at him with both fists flailing. Fred Latham backed away. He felt a blow graze his chin and another caught him high on the forehead and a third slid

off of his shoulder. He blocked several more and then he hit back, straight at Ellison's nose and he felt the nose flatten under his fist and saw fresh, red blood spreading over the lower part of the man's face.

Ellison backed away. He wiped the back of his hand across the lower part of his face and then charged in again and Fred Latham laughed as he moved in to meet him. It seemed as though a great load had slipped from his shoulders. He wasn't afraid. Ellison's fists had hurt him but they didn't hurt more than a man could stand.

A blow caught him on the side of the face and twisted him half around. Another smashed under his chin. He stumbled and went to the floor but got up quickly. He rocked Ellison backwards with another stab at the man's bloody nose and Ellison tripped over a chair and fell to the floor. When he got up, Ellison lifted the chair and hurled it at him and Latham didn't have a chance to get out of the way. The edge of the chair caught him across the temple and everything in the room was suddenly blurry.

He was on his knees and something tore into his side like the stab of a red hot iron. That pain came again and he twisted toward it, realizing that Ellison stood over him, kicking him. He lunged at the man's legs and brought Ellison down and that gave him a chance to get up.

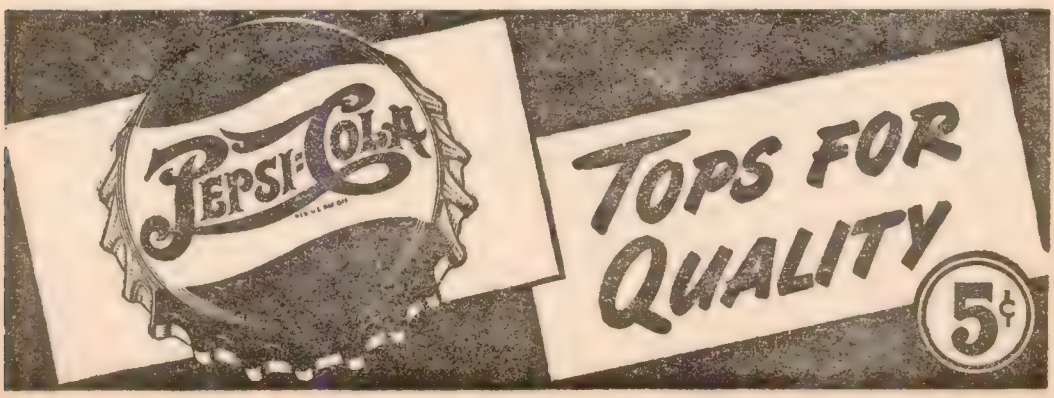
Latham was only vaguely aware of the others in the saloon. He caught a glimpse of Big Pete with a rifle in his hands and he wondered why. He hadn't heard Big Pete ordering Patton and Frenchie Knowles to keep clear of the fight and leave him and Ellison alone. His breath was coming heavier, now, and his throat was raw with the strain of it. He watched Ellison get up and he saw that Ellison's legs weren't very steady. He moved forward, shouting something, and he saw Ellison back away and saw the look of desperation come into the man's eyes. He started to close in and too late to stop he saw Ellison's hand dart under his coat and come out with a knife.

His fist stabbed at the man's face and Ellison was reeling backwards as his underhand thrust ripped at Latham's shirt. The point of the knife made a clean cut but only grazed him. Latham caught the man's wrist and twisted. He drew Ellison toward him and locked a leg around his knees and they went down, the knife between them. A high, thin scream came from Ellison's lips and his body twitched convulsively and then was still.

Fred Latham rolled free and got to his feet. He stared down at Ellison's body. The haft of the knife protruded at an angle from the man's chest. A bloody froth showed at his lips. His eyes were glassy and without life. Latham mopped a hand over his face and sucked in a long, ragged breath. He looked around the room. It seemed as though every table and chair in the place was smashed and that rather surprised him for he had no recollection of all this damage.

"You two fellows stay right where you are," said a familiar voice. "Stay right where you are and go on behaving yourselves."

Latham glanced over toward the bar. Dan Rossiter was leaning against it and was watching Patton and Frankie Knowles. His coat was pulled back and his hand was close to his gun.



"I reckon you need a drink, Fred," Dan continued. "Come on over here to the bar."

Fred Latham nodded. He grinned and the grin hurt and he lifted his hands to his lips and found that they were swollen and cut.

Dan watched him cross to the bar. It wasn't only his lips which were swollen. There was a bruise on his cheek and another on his chin and a cut under his left eye. His coat was torn at both shoulders and his shirt front was ripped wide open. One trouser knee was torn.

THIS must have been a real fight, Dan decided. He wished he had seen all of it. So far as he knew, Fred Latham had never before engaged in a bar-room brawl. He had always considered Latham as the quiet type of fellow who steered clear of trouble.

Ray Patton and Frenchie Knowles stood quietly against the wall across the room. One of them had reached for his gun when Latham had climbed to his feet after the sudden ending of the battle but Dan's warning had stopped him from any deliberate action. Dan stared at the two men thoughtfully.

"Where's Conroy?" he asked suddenly.

No one seemed to know. "He left here about an hour ago," Big Pete Meyers offered. "Said he'd be back."

Dan glanced at Harry Ward and then looked back to Patton and Frenchie Knowles. "One of you go find Conroy," he ordered. "Find him if you have to rouse the town. But be damned sure you get him down here!"

Frenchie moistened his lips. He was a slender man, dark skinned. He nodded his head and said, "I'll go," and moved toward the door.

Dan crossed over and made a swift examination of Doc Ellison and then returned to the bar. He thought of having another drink but decided against it and then while he waited he got to thinking about what Kate Randolph had told him and filtering her information into what he knew of the politics of the day, and into what he could guess.

The South had lost its battle against the Union, and Texas as one of the seceding states was now almost in the position of a conquered province. A Reconstruction Committee had been set up in Washington to outline ways for the readmission of the seceding states into the Union. Various civil authorities had been established all over the south. Dan knew of only one by name, the Freedman's Bureau which was concerned mainly with establishing the rights of the Negro to citizenship, but while that sounded good, in some places the Freedman's Bureau had turned out to be an organized effort to loot the south of what it had left after the war.

Just what had been decided with regard to Texas, he didn't know. Perhaps there really was such an office as that of United States Commissioner and perhaps Hugh Conroy had real authority. Perhaps the Union troops, if they were really on their way here, would back him up. But in what? What was there around Llano which made necessary a commissioner or a troop of soldiers?

Dan scowled. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

Big Pete Meyers moved toward him and said, "Dan, if you need any help when this fellow Conroy shows up, just yell. I've had about all of him I can stand."

"Thanks, Pete," Dan nodded.

Fred Latham joined them. One eye was now almost swollen shut and Dan had a notion Latham was beginning to feel the effects of the fight.

"I don't want you to get in any trouble on my account, Dan," Latham insisted.

"The trouble's already here," Dan answered slowly. "And it's something we can't duck, any of us."

"Just the same, if there's anything that's got to be done on account of this fight I had, well, let me do it."

Dan nodded and put his hat back on. He looked down the bar toward Harry Ward but Ward wouldn't meet his look. The man seemed restless, nervous.

Footsteps sounded outside the door and the door was suddenly thrust open and Frenchie Knowles and Conroy came into the saloon. Conroy took one quick look around the room and then headed straight for Doc Ellison's body, stood over it for a moment ,and afterwards swung to face the bar, his eyes boring at Fred Latham.

"I suppose you heard what happened," Dan said quietly. "Your man started the fight and when he was getting the worst of

it, pulled a knife. His death was accidental but probably deserved. Any jury in the world would see it in the same way."

As Dan was speaking Conroy's glance turned to him. "That's something I'll decide," he snapped when Dan finished.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that the man who killed Doc Ellison is under arrest."

"We don't have a peace officer in Llano."

"You've got one now. As United States Commissioner I have full police powers. Latham is under arrest!"

THIS was forcing the issue before Dan was ready but there seemed no way out. Dan couldn't help feel that Conroy would not respect Latham's rights as a prisoner.

"Take charge of the prisoner, Frenchie," Conroy ordered.

Dan Rossiter's gun came out so quickly that none of those in the room could remember having seen him reach for it.

"No, you'll not take charge of the prisoner, Frenchie," Dan said flatly. "I'll take charge of him myself. And Conroy, if you insist on a trial, it'll be a regular trial in a Texas court."

Frenchie had started forward but at the sight of Dan's gun had come to an abrupt stop. Conroy moistened his lips. A flush of anger showed in his face and then faded and the man's eyes narrowed.

"This means that you're defying the only recognized civil authority in this town, Rossiter," he said slowly. "I hope you appreciate what that means."

Dan shrugged. He had a feeling that Conroy had at first been angered but now was rather pleased the way things had turned out. He had a feeling that this was what Conroy wanted.

"Go and saddle your horse, Fred," he said to Latham. "And tell Tom Davenport to saddle mine. I'll meet you at the corral."

Latham hesitated momentarily, then nodded and headed for the door. Dan took a quick look at Harry Ward. He said, "Harry, I want you to look after Fred's feed store. You can find the time to do it easily. Once you even wanted to take it over, remember?"

Harry Ward bit his lips. He made no answer.

Dan leaned back comfortaly against the bar. His face showed none of the excitement he felt. He had a vague notion as to what lay ahead for him. If Conroy had any authority at all, the troops, now on their way here, could be sent against him. Fred Latham would be branded as a murderer and so would he.

After what seemed like hours, Dan Rossiter straightened up and holstered his gun and started for the door. Harry Ward's eyes widened and he couldn't believe what he saw, for after holding a gun on these men in the saloon, Dan Rossiter had put it away and had turned his back on them. Ward was sure he would be gunned down and a cry of warning lifted to his throat. He saw Frenchie Knowles claw at his holster but Conroy caught the man's arm and shook his head.

Dan reached the door, pulled it open and stepped outside. Then there was sound again in the saloon with Frenchie and Ray Patton crowding around Conroy and talking and with Big Pete acting busy behind the bar.

Ward edged forward and managed to catch Conroy's eye. "You told me to wait here," he prompted.

Hugh Conroy looked at him and suddenly started laughing and Ward wondered what was so funny.

"Sure I told you to stay here," Conroy agreed. "But you can go home now. Yep, go right ahead."

Ward turned toward the door. He was half angry, half confused. When he reached the door he looked back and what he saw didn't make him feel any better. Conroy was watching him and was still laughing and now Frenchie Knowles and Ray Patton was laughing, too. Harry Ward stepped through the door and jerked it shut with as loud a slam as he could manage. This small revolt lifted his spirits a little, and gave him, for a while, a sense of self assurance.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Watchful Waiting

TWENTY-EIGHT years before, Dan Rossiter and Sam Houston had been riding across these plains and had come, just at dusk, to a tree bordered stream which twisted its way through a wide area of low, rolling hills, so low that from a distance they hadn't been apparent at all. They had camped there that night and by the glow of the camp-fire had talked of the future of the newly created Republic of Texas.

"Some day," Dan had promised, "I'm going to settle in a place like this. I'll build a house and barns and I'll run cattle over a thousand acres."

Sam Houston had replied. "Dan, you'll never do it, never in the world as long as you drift and look ahead to someday. What's the matter with this place here and what's wrong with right now?"

It hadn't been right now but within two years Dan Rossiter had come back to that same spot with his bride and had thrown up his first cabin. In five more years he had a barn and corral and the first cabin had been rebuilt. In another five years two more barns and a bunkhouse were added. His cattle, by then, were numbered in the hundreds, and the Republic of Texas had ceased to exist. It had become a part of the United States.

In the years from then up to the present there had been few changes around the ranch but Dan's herds had steadily multiplied and the acres under his control had more than doubled. In dollars in the bank he wasn't a rich man and even the value of his cattle was questionable for there were many more cattle in Texas than could be sold on the market. This, however, hadn't troubled Dan Rossiter too much. There had been talk, before the war, of driving cattle north to market, and he was sure it could be done.

Dan's two boys born here on the ranch, had grown up to help him run the place with such help as was needed from a Mexican settlement, twenty-five miles away. But they had both lost their lives while fighting in the war. Dan had held things steady throughout the past few years by adding more Mexican riders to his payroll.

Jose Vargas was in charge of the Mexican riders. Jose was a man of about Dan's age. He had many brothers and sisters and a large family of his own. At times Dan was quite sure that everyone on his payroll was related to Jose in some way or other, but it didn't bother him a bit. Jose was a good man and he got the work done and if the Vargas clan lived richly on his beef and even took care of some of their friends, the investment paid good dividends in the loyalties it bought.

JOSE was at the ranch house when Dan and Fred Latham rode in Sunday morning and if he was surprised at Dan's early return from town he didn't show it. He was a short, heavy-set man, swarthy and with a bristling black mustache. He wore a serape and a high crowned native straw hat but otherwise, dressed much as Dan did around the ranch.

"Jose, I want you to post a rider about ten miles out on the road to Llano," Dan ordered. "If he sees anyone heading this way, I want to know about it in plenty of time to get ready."

"Si, Jefe," Jose nodded.

"Then come back to the house," Dan added. "I want to talk to you."

He opened the door for Latham and followed him inside. The parlor was immaculate and cool. There were two heavily framed pictures on the wall and on the floor was a rich colored Persian rug. The furniture was expensive but not guady.

Dan was tired for he had had no sleep. He and Latham had ridden all night. He was tired but he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep even if he went to bed. His mind was too active. He was too acutely aware of the many problems which now faced him.

"Maria probably knows we're here," he said to Latham, referring to his housekeeper. "She'll have breakfast ready in a minute. After that, you can lie down for a while."

Latham frowned. "I don't want to stay here, Dan. I'll only get you in trouble."

"I'm in trouble already and I need you."

"I wish I could believe that, Dan."

"Stick around and I'll prove it."

Jose came back into the room and nodded to Dan and stood waiting.

"Jose," Dan asked slowly, "do you

reckon you have a couple of cousins or brothers who aren't too well known in Llano and who can be trusted?

Jose was silent for a moment, then his face lighted up. "Si, Jefe, my oldest brother's son has two nephews by his wife who are honest young men. I, Jose Vargas, assure you of it. They have only lived here a short time. They are not known in Llano."

"Can you bring them to see me."

"Before nightfall, Jefe."

Dan said, "Fine. Make it sooner than that. And if these nephews have two cousins, get them as well."

"Si, Jefe."

"Tonight, the man watching the road will have to be relieved and a watch must be put around the ranch, a wide but close watch, Jose."

"It shall be done, Jefe."

The Mexican hurried out and Latham asked, "Isn't he curious, Dan? Doesn't he want to know what this is all about."

Dan Rossiter grinned. "Jose knows I'll tell him. He'll wait until I'm ready."

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THE next few days were hard on Fred Latham but not on Dan Rossiter. There had been many things around the house which Dan had wanted to do and which he had been putting off. He got to work on these things, now, and he encouraged Latham to help him.

Each morning after breakfast there was a report from a man who had ridden in during the night from Llano. Of the four men Jose Vargas had chosen, one was usually resting or on his way to Llano, one was on his way back, and two were on watch in the town.

Dan usually had little to say after hearing these reports. When he was told that eight more men and then that a total of fifteen had gathered at Llano and reported to Hugh Conroy, he only asked how the men were dressed and what they looked like. When he was told that Conroy spent part of every evening in the grocery with Ellen Ward while Ward was kept at the Lone Star bar, he only nodded. When he was told of a knife fight between two of Conroy's men in which one man was killed, he said nothing.

He showed his first sign of anger or concern when one of the men, one morning, said that Conroy's crowd had started a roughhouse in the Willow restaurant.

"They eat there?" Dan asked.

"Si."

"What about the woman who runs the place."

"She pays little attention to them, Jefe. I was outside one night when one of the men took her arm. She had a tray of dishes. She spilled the dishes all over him."

The Mexican grinned as he told the story, but Dan Rossiter didn't grin. His hands clenched until his muscles showed white and a rumbling oath came from his throat.

It was on the next morning that they heard about the arrival of the troops. About a hundred blue uniformed and well mounted men had set up their camp on the edge of the city. As soon as they had arrived the commanding officer who was very thin and walked with a limp had come into town and had asked for Hugh Conroy. He had spent about an hour with Conroy and had been scowling when he left.

Dan said nothing about the troops but asked about how things were at the Willow restaurant. The Mexican had nothing further to report about the restaurant.

The following evening, long after dusk, one of the Mexicans rode in on a well lathered horse. The troops were on the move, he reported. More than half of them, over fifty, had taken to the road at noon and were headed this way. Neither Conroy nor any of his men were with them.

Dan thanked the man and sent for Jose and then looked over at Latham. "It's come," he said briefly. "This is the beginning. Fred, I want you to go with Jose, stay with him until you hear from me."

"Go with him where?" Fred Latham asked.

"On a ride, maybe. A long ride."

"What are you going to do, Dan."

"The same thing. I'm just going a different way."

"But what about your house, Dan?"

Dan Rossiter took a look around the room and then grinned. "This house has stood a long time, Fred, as time goes in a new world. It's pretty well built. Let's not worry about it."

CHAPTER FIVE

Armed Invasion

CAPTAIN JOHN IRVINE had been born in Vermont. He was in college when the Civil War started. He was among the first men to enlist in the Union forces. He had enlisted because he had a deep belief in freedom and equality.

Five years of fighting had taught him a lot. He had learned that at best there was nothing glorious about battle, and that death had little respect for which side a man might be on. His belief in freedom and equality had not been shaken but he had seen much done in the name of freedom and equality which had no relationship with the terms.

His term of enlistment had ended with the war but when volunteers had been sought to enforce law and order in the south through the reconstruction period, Irvine had quickly signed up. He wasn't particularly interested in maintaining law and order. He felt that the south would be equal to that job, itself. What he really wanted was to see the results of what he had been fighting for. He wanted to see the re-

birth of liberty. And he wanted to have a part in rebuilding what he had helped to destroy.

At twenty-four, John Irvine looked ten years older. His face was thin and sharp featured and he seldom laughed. A wound received early in the war had slightly crippled him and he limped when he walked. At times the wound still pained him, which was partially responsible for his irritable manner and his occasional harshness. He was by nature a friendly fellow and he would have liked to have been on closer terms with his men, but he had never been able to manage it.

When he had reported for assignment to the commander of the Union troops in Texas he had been stationed for a time at Houston and then had been called into the commander's office.

"Ever hear of Llano, Texas?" he had been asked.

Irvine shook his head. "No, sir."

"It's in the northern part of the state, in the plains country," said the commander. "There's no other town around there for fifty or maybe a hundred miles and Llano isn't much of a place, only a handful of houses. No farming anywhere around. No industries. Only cattle. Understand?"

Irvine didn't. He waited silently.

"I've never heard of any trouble around Llano," the commander continued, "but I've just had a request from Washington to assign troops there. It seems that the Reconstruction Committee has sent in a special representative. His name is Hugh Conroy and the report I have calls him a United States Commissioner, though I don't know what that means. We are supposed to assist him in every possible way. I don't know what that means either, but a man named John Bainbridge is tied up with this someway, and Bainbridge is getting to be an important national figure. What I'm driving at is this, if Conroy needs help he's going to get it. You've got a good record, Captain. You seem to be a man who can use his head, a man who can make decisions. I don't want things bungled in Llano."

John Irvine nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Take a cavalry troop. Add to it enough to make a fighting force of a hundred men. Take supplies and camping equipment, cooks and stable hands. How soon can you choose your men and be ready to leave?"

"By tomorrow, sir."

"Fine. And Captain, if there's real trouble and you need more men, don't hesitate about asking for them. When you get to Llano report to Mr. Conroy and from there on, work under his direction."

CAPTAIN Irvine was recalling that conversation this evening as his troop made camp. At first he had been remembering that conversation with a good deal of pride. This was only natural. There were older officers and officers of higher rank to whom this assignment might have been given. That it had been given to him was an indication of trust and respect for his ability. And Irvine had been glad he had been selected.

Tonight, however, he wasn't so sure he was glad, and he tried to analyze his feelings. He had reported to Hugh Conroy as ordered and he had taken an almost immediate dislike to the man. He had also disliked the type of men with which Conroy had surrounded himself. Conroy and his men looked more like guerrillas than a civil committee. This was really all he had to go by, his impressions and feelings. This foray he was on, for instance, seemed logical. A man had been killed and the murderer had been offered protection by a local rancher. Conroy's authority had been challenged, and Conroy had appealed to him and had asked him to bring the man in, hinting that there might be trouble.

Captin Irvine scowled. He really didn't anticipate much trouble. Surely this man, Dan Rossiter, wouldn't defy an armed cavalry troop.

The troop was on its way early the next morning and shortly after noon reached the Rossiter ranch. They found the ranchhouse deserted and the corral empty.

Patrols were sent off in several directions but returned at dusk without having sighted anyone, though in plenty of places they had seen tracks left by shod horses. Evening mess was served and a guard was posted. Captain Irvine established himself in the ranchhouse, a little puzzled as to what to do.

There was a knock on the door and one of his men came in and saluted and said, "Sir, we've found a Mexican hiding in one of the barns. How he escaped our search

I don't know. Would you like to talk to him. I can understand the Mexican lingo enough to act as interpreter."

Captain Irvine nodded. "Bring him in, Sergeant."

Sergeant West left the room and returned in a moment with two soldiers who were flanking the Mexican. The Mexican was swarthy, middle aged, stooped. He wore tattered clothing, a serape of brilliant colors and was barefooted.

"What is your name?" Sergeant West asked in stilted Spanish.

"Pedro Flores."

"Where is the man who lives here?" demanded the sergeant.

The Mexican made some answer but West didn't get it and the Mexican had to repeat it several times. Finally West got the drift of what he was saying.

"I think he's a little afraid to speak, Captain," West reported to Irvine. "He wants you to send these other two men from the room. He's been searched. He isn't armed."

Captain Irvine nodded and told the guards to go and after they left the Mexican crossed the room to a tall bookcase. Captain Irvine and Sergeant West watched him curiously. They saw him take out several books and then reach into the bookcase again and then saw him whirl to face them and realized, suddenly, that they were looking down the barrel of a gun.

"Were you dreaming of secret passages, gentlemen?" asked the Mexican in perfect English, "or were you expecting me to pull some sort of loot from behind the books?"

Captain Irvine flushed. "I am not in the habit of looting houses," he snapped. "I suppose you are Dan Rossiter."

Dan Rossiter nodded. "I am, and this gun shoots quite easily. Please don't call your men."

"You can't escape. I suppose you know that."

"We'll talk about escaping later. There are some other things I want to talk about first."

"Suppose you begin by telling me where to find Fred Latham."

DAN pushed back his hat with his free hand. He was standing so that his body shielded the gun he was holding from the sight of anyone who might be looking through the windows. "Captain," he said slowly, "you can ride these plains from one one end to the other and across and back from now until a year from next Christmas, and you'll never catch a glimpse of Fred Latham."

"You mean he's gone?"

"No, he's not gone. He's been accused of murdering a man and he's not the kind to run away."

"Then what do you call this, Rossiter?"

Dan Rossiter shrugged. "I haven't a name for it, but I can tell you this. Fred Latham is willing to stand trial in a regular Texas court, any time, any where. If you have charge of this district, name the city and I'll see that Fred Latham is there. We don't have a regular court in Llano."

"The new United States Commissioner has judicial powers,"

"Conroy! I wouldn't trust him to try a dog."

Captain Irvine's lips tightened. He took a step forward. "Rossiter, I order you to surrender yourself for harboring a murderer and to surrender the murderer as well."

"And I," said Dan Rossiter, "refuse. I have made my offer. I have lived here a long time. Men know that I keep my word."

"And I do my job, Rossiter," Captain Irvine snapped. "I shall hold you and I shall search every part of the country until I find Latham if I have to dig up every gopher hole for fifty miles."

A faint smile touched Dan Rossiter's lips. "There's one more thing I want to talk about, Captain, though there may be no point in it. I have quite a large ranch. I have actually more than a hundred thousand cattle. That's a lot of cattle. And here's something interesting. Hugh Conroy may call himself a United States Commissioner, whatever that is, but he's strangely interested in cattle and he's got a crowd of men in Llano who are cattle hands. He's been heard to mention a cattle drive to Kansas. Suppose you figure it out. He doesn't own any cattle himself. He hasn't offered to buy any. What do you reckon he's got in mind?"

Captain Irvine frowned. "What you are suggesting is ridiculous."

"Is it, Captain? Suppose I am arrested and sent away or suppose I am killed. What

happens to my ranch and all my cattle."

They would be protected for your heirs."

"By Hugh Conroy?" Dan grinned. "Now who's being ridiculous, Captain."

The captain's frown grew deeper but he made no answer. Dan took a quick step toward the door which led to the back of the house. He looked at Irvine again and at Sergeant West. The sergeant had been glaring at him throughout this entire interview and was still glaring.

"I'm leaving now, Captain," Dan said quietly. If either you or the sergeant make any fuss before I step out of the room I shall use this gun, and don't think I don't mean it. After I've gone through the door, yell all you wish. I know every foot of the house and yard and I don't think I'll have any trouble at all getting away. Incidentally, make yourselves right at home on my ranch. If you don't see what you want, ask for it."

A flush of color again came into Captain Irvine's face. He watched tensely as Dan moved toward the back door and as Dan stepped from sight he heard Sergeant West shout an alarm and take out after him.

Dan heard that cry, too, as he hurried across the kitchen. He let himself outside and angled for the barn, his gun still in his hand. The back door banged open and a shot screamed above his head. He reached the corner of the barn, circled behind it and raced for the open country. Sergeant West was screaming orders, was trying to organize a pursuit. There was more shooting but none of the shots came close.

Dan slowed down to a trot, then to a walk. The rough ground hurt his feet. "Jefe," called a voice. "Jefe, this way."

Two horses loomed up out of the darkness. Jose Vargas was on one. The other was Dan's. Dan reached for his shoes and socks and sat down and put them on. He opened a bundle Jose tossed him and took out the clothing he customarily wore to town. It took but a moment to change.

"How is Fred Latham?" he asked.

"He is well, Jefe."

Dan climbed into the saddle. He said, "Thanks, Jose. I'll see you night after tomorrow at Indian Mound."

"I will be there," the Mexican promise.

Dan Rossiter grinned and waved his hand and set out toward Llano.

CHAPTER SIX

Dan's Gunsmoke Promise

IT WAS still dark when Dan reached town. He unsaddled near the livery stable and turned his horse into the corral, leaving his saddle, bridle and blanket by the side door of the stable. Tom Davenport would recognize his horse, he knew, but he didn't think that Tom would talk.

Dan had the key to Fred Latham's feed store and he let himself in and locked up again and then stood back of the front window and watched the street. If anyone had seen him, there was no sign of it. After a time Dan went to the back room and made a bed on a pile of empty grain sacks and just as it was growing light he dozed off.

The sound of someone rattling the door woke him and he sat up just as he heard the door open. He was out of sight when Harry Ward came into the back room but he saw the grocer shoulder a sack of grain, make a careful tally on a sheet of paper tacked to the wall and then head for the

front of the store. The door was opened and closed and locked again.

Dan rubbed a hand over his chin and jaw. He looked frightful and he knew it. Jose had decided his skin wasn't tan enough to pass as a Mexican and had stained the skin of his face, neck, chest and hands and arms. Dan ventured into the front of the store. By the shadow cast by the sun he judged that it was past noon.

The store window was pretty dirty. Dan decided that if he stood back by the wall he wouldn't be noticed through the window unless someone made a definite effort to look inside the store. He chose the side from which he could watch the Willow restaurant. Men went in an out the restaurant door. A good many of them were strangers to him. These were Conroy's recruits, he decided, and the report he had had on them had been pretty good. They were a hard, reckless looking crowd. Some of them would stop as they came out of the restaurant and take a quick look up and down the street as though anticipating trouble.

Dan saw Hugh Conroy come from the restaurant and saw him stop and talk for a moment to Tom Davenport. A momentary expression of anxiety came into his face for Tom was the one man in Llano who could be sure he was somewhere in town. Tom moved on, however, and Hugh Conroy showed no undue excitement. He crossed the street and angling for the opposite walk, and in another moment, Dan knew, he would be passing the feed store.

DAN moved quickly toward the door. He took a glance through the window up the street. There were two men in sight but quite a ways off. Dan slid his key into the lock and turned it and then drew his gun. He heard the sound of Conroy's feet just outside the door and he suddenly pushed the door open. Conroy's head turned toward him and the man went rigid, his eyes on Dan's gun.

"Step inside, quickly," Dan ordered. "And don't yell for help. It would never reach you in time."

Hugh Conroy moistened his lips. He looked up the street and then looked the other way and then looked at Dan again. Dan could read the man's mind perfectly. He could sense the manner by which Conroy was measuring his chances, either to go for his gun or to try to attract someone's attention.

"Inside," Dan ordered again, his voice sharp, commanding.

Dan's hand tightened on his gun. He had thumbed the hammer half way back. He had only to release it and the gun would explode.

Conroy sucked in a long, slow breath and then stepped forward. Dan backed away and Conroy came on into the room. From out in the street Dan could hear voices. He didn't know whose voices. He didn't dare look away from Conroy. These men might have seen Conroy step inside, he knew. They might be curious.

"Not a sound, Conroy," he said under his breath. "Close the door—softly."

Conroy reached behind him and closed the door. The men outside drew closer. Even if they hadn't seen Conroy step in here they would see both him and Conroy if they looked through the window. Dan knew this and waited rigidly. The men came up to the door and passed on, their voices fading out as they moved down the street.

Dan edge around toward the door, waving Conroy away with his gun. He locked the door and put the key in his pocket. "Head for the back room," he ordered bluntly.

"I'd just as soon be murdered here," Conroy snapped.

"I said, the back room," Dan repeated.

Conroy's lips tightened. The scar on his cheek was a pale, white gash. His eyes were wide open and were darting nervously around the store. He backed away a step as Dan moved toward him, then took another step backwards and then another. Fear was showing in his eyes, now. Fear and desperation. He came to the door to the back room and stepped through it. Dan followed him. Dan was now breathing easier. There wasn't so much chance of discovery back here unless he had to use his gun.

"I don't know why I don't kill you, Conroy," he said slowly. "I don't think it would be murder. It isn't murder when you kill a rat."

Hugh Conroy swallowed. He made no answer.

"Maybe I want to know, first, what it is you're after," Dan went on. "What is it, Conroy? My cattle?"

"No, I—I—" Hugh Conroy's mouth moved up and down but he didn't seem able to get any more words out. And then he suddenly clawed at his gun. Dan stepped quickly forward. He smashed his gun across Conroy's temple.

The weapon Conroy had drawn slipped from his hands and fell to the floor and the man's knees buckled and he went down. Dan holstered his own gun, then stooped over and picked up Conroy's and dropped it into his pocket. He stared down at the man. Conroy's hat had fallen off and there was a swelling across his temple but the man still breathed. He was only unconscious.

Dan found some cord and tied Conroy's hands and feet. He made a gag of sacking and fixed it in place. Afterwards he took a look toward the front of the store but he could see no one through the window. It seemed apparent that Conroy hadn't been seen entering the store that his entrance had aroused no curiosity.

The afternoon passed slowly. Hugh Conroy regained consciousness and tried to talk through his gag. Dan loosened it and Conroy swore at him.

"Tell me, Conroy," Dan insisted. "Is it my cattle you want."

Conroy swore again. "You don't know it," he said defiantly, "but you don't have any cattle. Part of them—" He broke off, suddenly, as though realizing that he had said too much or that he was in no position to boast."

Dan nodded his head. This was enough. This was what he had wanted to know. He tightened the gag once more and grinned at Conroy.

"I still ought to kill you," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose I'll have to, one of these days."

IN THE first early dusk, Dan Rossiter left the feed store by the back door. He circled around to the livery stable and as soon as Tom Davenport saw him the old man brought out his horse, already saddled.

"I figgered you'd be around," he commented. "There's plenty more men in town. I don't think I'd risk coming back, Dan. They're after you."

"Saddle another horse, Tom," Dan ordered.

Tom Davenport didn't blink. He turned into the stable and a moment later came out with a second saddled horse. Dan mounted his own horse and took the reins of the other. He circled back once more until he was behind the Willow restaurant and there he found a place to tie the two horses.

The back door of the restaurant was open but he waited outside until he saw Kate and then he opened the door and stepped in. The smell of food reminded him that he was ravenously hungry but he forgot that when he saw Kate's face closely. The girl looked tired. Her face was pale and the lines around her mouth were deeper. There were deep shadows under her eyes.

"Dan!" she gasped. "What are you doing here?" She took a quick look over her shoulder toward the door to the restaurant.

Dan managed a grin. He was thinking, even then, how good it was just to see Kate again.

"Dan," he heard her saying swiftly. "Dan, you've got to go. Those men in there—"

"I've two horses outside, Kate," Dan interrupted. "Do you think I can leave you here and not worry about you. Come on, just as you are."

"I can't, Dan. I—" Kate caught her breath and jerked around. The door from the restaurant had burst open and framed in it was the huge, bulky figure of Ray Patton. The man had a coffee cup in his hand. Perhaps he had grown tired of waiting for a second cup of coffee. But if it was coffee he was after he had forgotten it. His eyes were fixed on Dan Rossiter.

Then suddenly, and without a word, he dropped the cup and jerked for the gun in his holster.

Kate stood half between Dan and Ray Patton and there was no time for Dan to move away. His hand slapped down for his gun and came up again in perhaps the fastest motion he had ever made. His finger was already depressing the trigger as he thumbed back the hammer. He could have fired quicker but he had to be sure of this shot. It would have to pass close to the girl. He heard the roar of Patton's gun even as he released the hammer and he saw Patton jerk erect and the surprised look in the man's face as he started to fall.

Where Patton's bullet went he didn't know. The man had evidently fired too fast to take good aim.

"Come on, Kate," he heard himself calling.

The girl didn't move. She seemed stunned. Dan Rossiter moved forward and caught her by the arm and hurried her out the door. He got her into the saddle and as he mounted himself he became aware of the shouting from the restaurant and saw men hurrying around it from the street and pouring from the back door. Still leading Kate's horse he started off across country. There might be a pursuit, he knew, but of that he wasn't afraid. He knew this plains country as well as he had boasted to Captain Irvine.

The sounds of the shooting in the restaurant didn't mean anything to Harry Ward. He left the grocery, almost stumbling, and he tried the Lone Star first, looking for Hugh Conroy. He didn't find Conroy there or at the other saloon or at the Llano House and then he remembered that he hadn't seen Conroy since noon. As he circled past the feed store toward his home he thought he heard sounds from inside, and he took time to investigate.

There was still light enough in the back room for Conroy to recognize Harry Ward and Conroy's face brightened at the sight of him. Then that look of relief disappeared for this man standing above him wasn't the Harry Ward whom Conroy knew. His face was hard and strained. Bitter invectives broke suddenly from Ward's lips and just as suddenly, Ward kicked Conroy viciously in the face. He kicked the man again and again and now a horrible sobbing rumbled from his throat.

At last Harry Ward broke away. He made for the street and for a while stood motionless in front of the door. He didn't know whether Conroy was dead or not. He didn't care. After a while he headed for home and there he hitched up a wagon and then drove to the store. He went inside. Ellen was still whimpering. She cowed away from him when she saw him.

"Come on," Harry Ward said quietly. "We're leaving."

Ellen Ward shook her head.

Harry stared at her. He had the strange feeling that he was not looking at his wife but at an old woman and his voice was kind as he said, "It was partly my fault, Ellen. I guess I wasn't much of a man. Come on."

Ellen still didn't move and after another moment Harry Ward went over and picked her up and carried her out to the wagon. He didn't lock the store door. He climbed into the seat and reached for the reins and turning the wagon south, drove away from Llano. He didn't once look back. He and Ellen were leaving Llano forever and he wanted no more memories than he would have to carry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bushwhack Retreat

DAN had tried to kill him. This was Hugh Conroy's story and he stuck to it. Rossiter had come to Llano, had hidden out in the feed store, had held him up at the point of a gun, had disarmed him and bound him and then had beaten him senseless and had left him, thinking him dead. Later Rossiter had murdered Ray Patton and had kidnapped Kate Randolph.

Conroy told this story to Captain Irvine. It wasn't easy to tell for most of his face was swathed in bandages and it hurt to talk.

"I want him run down if it takes every soldier in Texas," Conroy said grimly. "The man doesn't even deserve a trial."

Irvine's eyes narrowed. "What about his ranch and cattle."

"He probably has some folks. I shall take custody of his property until I can determine to whom it belongs."

"In fact, you already have enough men to handle his cattle."

Hugh Conroy stiffened. "What the hell do you mean, Irvine?"

"Why I was just thinking how lucky it was that you had so many men, Conroy. That's all."

"That had better be all," Conroy snapped.

He turned away and stalked off. The next day he and his men left for the Rossiter ranch and Irvine and the cavalry troop went along. Two nights later, patrols were scouring the plains, on the look out for Rossiter or for any sign of him.

During the week which followed, Con-

roy's band gathered together a huge herd of cattle and started it north from a point far west of the ranchhouse. Just after midnight at the end of the first day's drive, a band of riders stampeded the herd and scattered it over a hundred acres. Conroy's men fought back and one of them was killed. The body of a Mexican was found the next morning and it was assumed that he had been one of those who had stampeded the herd.

Word of this battle came to the ranchhouse and Irvine's troop set out to follow the trail left by these night riders, but there was no trail to follow. The men seemed to have ridden off in as many directions as were taken by the stampeded cattle.

Conroy's men tried several times to assemble the herd, but again there was trouble. It might be just a sprinkling of shots at dusk or any time after then until dawn. Or it might be a wild, screaming charge from the Mexican night riders and another stampede and the exchange of gunfire between the night riders and Conroy's men.

Captain Irvine went without sleep. He split up his patrols and stationed his men as advantageously as possible but the Mexicans still evaded the troops and made their attacks on Conroy's band. Several men were injured, two seriously.

"What am I supposed to do," Irvine had asked Conroy, irritably. "Protect your men while they drive off Rossiter's cattle."

"They're not planning on driving off the cattle," Conroy had shot back. "It's only by a ruse like this that we can draw Rossiter out of hiding."

Captain Irvine didn't believe that. A dozen more riders had reached the ranch and had reported to Conroy and their talk of a cattle drive north was common gossip in the soldiers' camp.

One morning there was a note tacked on the ranch house door, signed by Dan Rossiter, and ordering Conroy off his property. This was at the end of the first two weeks Conroy had spent at the ranch. Conroy's nerves were beginning to get ragged by this time. If he was to get a herd north he had to get it under way pretty promptly or it would be too late in the season to try a drive. He sent a man to Llano with a letter addressed to a man in Washington named John Bainbridge. The man didn't ever

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reach Llano. His body was found in the road, not ten miles from the ranch house. He had been shot through the head. The letter he had been carrying was missing.

The next morning another note was found tacked to the ranchhouse door. It read:

GET OUT NOW OR NONE OF YOU WILL EVER LEAVE TEXAS ALIVE.

DAN ROSSITER.

And that morning a tall, gaunt, bearded stranger appeared at the ranch house and asked for Hugh Conroy. He said that his name was Ed Randolph.

CAPTAIN Irvine's loyalties were confused. He had a feeling that Dan Rossiter was only technically a murderer and that Conroy, even if he was a United States Commissioner, was in reality a brigand and a thief. He had tried to run Rossiter down but in his heart he hoped the fellow escaped.

He received his summons to the house that morning with ill grace and was slow to get there but for once Conroy didn't mind. "Captain Irvine," he said, "this is Ed Randolph. He's got some real news for us."

Irvine looked at Ed Randolph and didn't like what he saw. The man seemed about forty. His cheeks were hollow and he had sharp irregular features.

"Randolph is the husband of the woman Rossiter kidnapped," Conroy went on. "He lived here before he went away to war. He knows this country and Rossiter and his habits and he knows how important I am, a thing which you seem to have failed to realize."

Irvine ignored the sarcasm. He stared at Randolph and wondered how any woman could ever have married a fellow such as him.

"Dan Rossiter hides out and gets his supplies from Carpenteria," Randolph stated. He had a husky, thick voice. "A good many of his riders live in Carpenteria. I reckon most of the folks in that Mex town really work for Dan Rossiter. There's where you can trap him, if anywhere. You don't have a chance on the plains."

"Do you know where this town of Carpentreia is?" Conray asked.

Captain Irvine nodded. His patrols had discovered it long ago and he had seen it from a distance himself. Ever since then he had had the notion that Carpenteria might be the headquarters of Rossiter and his men.

"We're moving in on Carpenteria," Conroy said grimly. "The moon is full and the nights are bright. If you split your men into patrols and make a wide sweep in toward the town we can corner Rossiter and most of his band. My men will cover the other side. Is that clear?"

It was, and again Captain Irvine nodded. Yes, it could be done. He had thought of it but had held back. Rossiter, of course, might not be cornered, but at least his strength could be broken.

"We'll make our plans now," Conroy said. "I want action in a hurry."

This was it, Dan Rossiter knew. Men riding in from the east and from the south and from the north and even from the west, carried the same story. In from a dozen to fifteen different groups, the soldiers were closing in on Carpenteria. This was by a definite plan and Conroy's men were riding with them. There was no other way to figure it. The patrols would not have converged on this town by accident.

Dan entered the room in which Jose Vargas was lying. Jose's face was flushed. He was burning up with fever. The upper part of his body was swathed in bandages. He had been brought in two days before after a long and strenuous ride and Dan was a little surprised that he still lived when he first saw the wound. He was beginning, now, to think that he might possibly pull through. How he had been shot Dan didn't know, but on his body he had found a letter signed by Conroy and addressed to John Bainbridge in Washington. The letter revealed a plot, broader than Dan had ever imagined.

Kate Randolph came into the room and whispered, "How is he, Dan. Any improvement?"

"He's holding his own," Dan answered. "Come on outside."

"His fever hasn't broken."

"But he's still alive, still fighting, Kate."

THE sun had been down for two hours but its warmth still lingered in the air and there was a bright, full moon. Dan and

Kate sat down on a bench outside the adobe house. There was a stream nearby and a few trees and fringing the stream on either side were the fifteen or twenty adobe houses which made up the village of Carpenteria.

"Some of the men are riding west tonight, Kate," Dan said after a few moments of silence. "I want you to go with them. It's rather important."

Kate shook her head. "I've heard the talk, Dan. The soldiers are closing in. You won't leave because of Jose. I'm not going to leave either."

Dan bit his lips. "I don't know how things will work out, Kate, after the soldiers get here. I'd feel better if you were out of it."

"You can't fight the troopers, Dan. You wouldn't have a chance."

"I hope we'll not have to. I'm going to try to get to Captain Irvine with the letter Jose brought me. If I can reach him we may not have the troops against us, but I can't be sure of that. I wish you'd leave with the others."

A faint smile showed on Kate's lips. "They're not leaving, any of them. They talked it over a while ago. They decided that if you and Jose stayed, they would stay, too. Dan, I don't think you've ever realized the loyalty of Jose's people of the strength that you have in their loyalty. I shouldn't have said Jose's people. They're your people, Dan."

Dan Rossiter drew in a long, slow breath. He said, "Yes, Kate. They're my people, too. I've come to know that in the past for myself, but for them, for their interest in this ranch which I've called mine."

A young Mexican rider came and stood before them. "The troops will be here before dawn, Jefe," he reported.

"Then you and the others should leave, Ramon," Dan ordered.

The Mexican shook his head. "Our horses are tired. Besides, where would we go. This is our home, Jefe."

It would do no good to argue with this man or with the others, Dan knew. He was silent for a moment, then he said, "Thanks, Ramon. Will you see that a watch is kept and tell those to sleep who are not needed. We will not fight the soldiers if it can be helped."

"But the others."

"The others we will fight."

The Mexican's teeth showed in a wide grin. "That is good, Jefe." He turned and left.

Dan stood up. "You should get some sleep, too, Kate." His hand rested for a moment on the girl's shoulder and afterwards he moved off toward the far end of the village.

Most of the women and children had been sent away three weeks before when the trouble had first started. Dan was thankful for that, now. Those left, in the main, were men who could fight if there was any need. And a few women who had refused to leave with the others and who had stayed, knowing the chances they took. Dan wasn't sure just how many men there were. Thirty, perhaps. Or forty. Thirty or forty against three times that number.

The moon reached higher into the sky. The troops drew nearer, closing their circle of steel around Carpenteria.

CHAPTER EIGHT

New Life For Llano

AT DAWN Captain Irvine made his final inspection and then returned to his tent where Hugh Conroy was waiting.

"A rabbit couldn't get through our lines now without being seen," he said.

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Conroy grinned. "When do we move in on the town?"

"As soon as it's a little lighter. And I don't want any more shooting than necessary. I don't want any of the women or children hurt."

"There aren't any," Conroy answered. "The women and children moved out some time ago. Ed Randolph is sure of that."

Irvine glanced at Randolph who was accompanying Conroy and Randolph nodded. "I learned that in town. There's folks there in Llano who know everything that's happened."

"How many men does Rossiter have?" Irvine asked.

"Tell him everything you can, Randolph," Conroy suggested. I want to get back to my men."

Conroy mounted his horse and rode away and Randolph said, "I don't know how many exactly. Less than fifty."

Captain Irvine grunted. He looked at this man narrowly. "Who's Bainbridge?" he asked suddenly.

"John Bainbridge?" Randolph grinned. "So you've heard of him, huh."

"Yes."

"But you don't know who he is?"

"I know vaguely. How important is he, Randolph?"

"He's plenty important. He's a big man now and in another few years there won't be a bigger man in the country. This is only a part of his scheme, this plan to grab control of the cattle in Texas. He means to control the market in Kansas, too, and the railroads and telegraph and mining out west. He's a man to tie up with, Captain."

"Man approaching with a white flag, sir," called a trooper standing nearby.

Captain Irvine looked toward the town. A Mexican had just left one of the houses and was starting toward the soldiers. A white cloth was tied to a stick which he held high in the air. The Mexican was a dozen steps from the house when a rifle shot sounded. The Mexican stopped, started to turn back His knees buckled under him and he fell to the ground.

"Who fired that shot?" Captain Irvine shouted.

A sprinkling of gunfire sounded from all around the town and from the west came heavy gunfire and yelling as Conroy and his men rode toward Carpenteria.

DAN ROSSITER saw the Mexican who was carrying the white flag stop and then turn half around as the rifle bullet hit him. He heard the first spattering shots of the battle and he turned to face those in the room with him. His face showed the stunned, disbelief which he felt. He had never dreamed that the white flag would not be respected. He blamed himself for having sent the man who had been shot and he wondered what he could say to those in this room with him.

"They are coming, Jefe," said one of the Mexicans. He stepped to the window and fired through it and then stepped back to reload his rifle.

Dan took his place. He heard yelling and saw Conroy's men sweeping down on the town, firing as they came. Beyond them he saw the soldiers moving up and he knew that this was the end. He lifted his rifle and a man rode into the sights and Dan fired and then saw the man pitch from his saddle. Kate Randolph took his gun and handed him another and he sighted and fired again. From the two other windows the Mexicans were firing. Latham was firing from a third.

Conroy's men were now in the town and had thrown themselves from their horses and had sought shelter in the doorways of the houses and at the sides. A body thumped against the door of this house and Dan jerked around and hurried to the door and opened it. One of Conroy's men was just outside. His gun went off almost in Dan's face. Dan raised his foot and thrust the man back into the street and one of the Mexicans firing from his side, shot the fellow in the chest.

He was getting one wish, Dan realized. He had hoped that if a fight couldn't be avoided, Conroy's men would get here first. And they had. There was perhaps a reason for it. It might be that Conroy didn't want any prisoners taken and wanted to finish things up before the soldiers could gain control. But whether for a reason or not, Conroy and his men were out there in the street and from the way things had happened, Dan knew that he couldn't have asked for more than this.

Dan turned and hurried toward the back of the house. He heard Kate calling to him but he didn't look back or answer. He opened the back door and stepped outside.

A man crouched at the corner of the house jerked around and brought his gun up. Dan fired and the man half got to his feet and then collapsed, face down. Dan turned the other way. He saw a man crouching against the next house, toward the front, and he fired again. That man never knew what hit him.

"Keep back! Keep down, everyone!" Conroy was shouting. "Wait for the soldiers."

Dan heard that call and he placed it toward the houses which lined the stream. He started running that way. A shot knicked his shoulder and another carried away his hat. He saw a Mexican a little ways ahead struggling with two of Conroy's men, saw the man clubbed to the earth and then shot and he took two quick shots at those men and saw both of them duck out of sight.

Fred Latham was yelling at him, following him, but Dan wasn't aware of it. He was close, now, to the point from which he had heard Conroy's voice and he circled the low adobe building he had come to. Three men were sheltered close to the wall behind it, one of them a tall man with a bandaged face. Hugh Conroy. Dan Rossiter lifted his gun and fired it but the hammer clicked on an empty shell. He saw Conroy's gun come up and heard it explode and felt a searing pain in his side. He saw the other two men swing their guns toward him. Fred Latham came racing past him and he heard the sound of Fred's shots and saw one of the men go down and the other turn to run.

When his own gun hadn't fired, he had thrown it at Conroy. Dan's fist smashed out and caught Conroy on the side of his bandaged face. He hit the man again and again, driving him backwards. Conroy tripped and went to the ground and rolled away and got up. He started to run but Dan caught him and pulled him down again.

Conroy twisted free and kicked viciously at Dan's head but missed. Dan got to his feet. He pulled Conroy erect and smashed him in the face, holding him by the shirt front with one hand. He hit the man again and Conroy went down.

There was no shooting now, and quite a crowd of men from the town had gathered around them but Dan wasn't aware of it. He was remembering that the soldiers would be here soon and that he hadn't long to finish this fight. He pulled Conroy to his feet once more and suddenly the pain which had been spreading out from his side filmed his eyes and he hit at Conroy but without any strength.

A blow in the face rocked him backwards and the earth seemed to come up and hit him. Conroy, he realized suddenly, was on him now and the man's fingers were feeling for his throat. Dan clawed at the man's face. His hands slid downwards to Conroy's thick neck and fastened there and dug in and after a moment it seemed to him that Conroy's grasp on his own neck had loosened and that his fingers had fallen away.

Dan's grip tightened. He couldn't see, now, but that didn't make any difference. He was close to slipping into the shadows which were growing up all around him but he didn't want to go into those shadows alone. He meant to take Hugh Conroy with him. He tried, desperately, to pour every bit of his strength into his fingers.

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CAPTAIN IRVINE had sent a trooper in each direction around the town with orders to his men to cease firing and to fall back. This meant the end of his military career, he knew, but for some reason or other, he didn't care.

As soon as he was sure these orders had been obeyed, he rode on into Carpenteria alone. The firing had stopped, now. For a while it had been pretty furious and as he came into the town he counted eight motionless bodies. Mexican guns covered him, he was sure, and at any moment there might be one more shot. There wasn't, however, and when he was about in the center of the place he dismounted. At the side of one of the buildings he saw quite a crowd and headed that way. Two men were down here. One of them was Hugh Conroy. The bandages had been torn off of his face and his face was bloated. He wasn't breathing. The other man was Dan Rossiter. A woman was kneeling at Rossiter's side. Irvine guessed that here was the woman Rossiter had been supposed to have kidnapped.

The men made way for him and when he reached the woman's side he said. "I have a doctor with the troop, Madam. I'll send for him."

Kate Randolph looked up. "Thank you very much," she replied quietly.

Captain Irvine looked around at the Mexicans. They didn't seem to him to be desperate men, or even hostile. One of them said something but he didn't understand the language. He smiled at the fellow and got an answering grin. Afterwards he went back to his horse and started for the doctor. On the way out of town he took time to examine the bodies he had passed. One of the men who had been killed was Ed Randolph.

Dan Rossiter lay in a bed in the same room with Jose Vargas. He looked up at Kate Randolph. She smiled at him and reached for his hand.

"It isn't over yet," Dan said slowly. "It's true that Bainbridge had been smashed in this first attempt that he has made to gain control of the west. But he isn't through. We can get the men to buck him if he tries to move into Texas again, but we need money. That drive to Kansas can be made. There's still time. Cattle will sell for a damn good price in that country."

"I'll make that drive for you, Dan," Captain Irvine offered. "I'm about through with the army. What I've seen of Llano interests me."

"Glad to have you," Dan replied, offering the Captain his hand. They clasped hands firmly.

Dan Rossiter closed his eyes, He was feeling tired. He heard Kate whispering to the captain and then heard him leave the room and after that he knew that Kate had come back to her place near his bed.

"How is Jose?" he asked.

"Resting easier, Dan. His fever has broken."

Dan nodded. "You should get some rest, too."

"There's plenty of time ahead for that."

Dan looked over at the girl. "It will work out, Kate," he said slowly.

"Yes, I'm sure it will, Dan. Now go to sleep."

Dan Rossiter grinned and then closed his eyes. But he reached once more for Kate's hand and held it tightly. And then he pulled her toward him until he could feel her face next to his and held her there until she had kissed him. After that, he slept.

THE END

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(My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

TIO-TOUGH-HAND!

By THOMAS THOMPSON

Tio knew then what he must do.

To Tio Tejon, being keeper of the irrigation ditch was a position of dignity and importance. . . . For had not the El Paso council instructed him to keep the ditch free of all trash and refuse—which surely included quick-trigger gunslicks?

THERE was a rider coming through the sand hills, dodging the mesquite brush and making his way toward the cottonwood trees that stood wide spaced around the square at Magoffinsville. Tio Tejon saw, but he did not pay much attention. Was this unusual, a rider? Was it not to be expected? El Paso was no longer a single clump of buildings—El Paso was a city. Did they not have a mayor and a council? It was the council that appointed Tio Tejon *alcalde* of the *acequia*. A job of im-

portance, this—keeper of the irrigation ditch. It was a good job. A job with dignity, and a job that carried a great responsibility. Tio Tejon shaded his eyes against the sun and looked again at the rider. He rode like an Apache, Tio thought, and he spat at the bank of his *acequia.* Tio did not like Apaches.

But the rider was not an Apache. He had the high cheek bones and the litheness in the saddle, but there the resemblance stopped. He was a tall man, thin of face and hard of eye. His horse was spent, and against the gaunt side of the beast a Henry rifle protruded from a boot. From the pommel of his apple-horn saddle was slung a sawed-off shotgun and the stranger's coat was pulled back to expose a pistol shoved deep in his waist-band. Such men were not unusual here along the border, but there was that about this one that made Tio Tejon purse his thin lips and size the man closely. The stranger rode up the steep high bank of the irrigation ditch to let his horse drink. Tio Tejon put up one hand in mild protest.

"Señor," the old Mexican said. "I would not refuse water nor food for yourself and your animal, but it is the law that no animal drinks from the *acequia.* You will be tended well if you will but ride to the plaza." The old man stepped forward and took the horse gently by the bridle. The stranger lashed out with his reins and cut the ditch tender across the back of the hands. Tio Tejon jumped back, a look of startled hurt on his wizened old face.

"But Señor," he protested. "You do not understand." His eyes brightened. "Here—" He reached under his coat and brought out a sheet of well thumbed paper. "I read to you—" He tilted back his head, held the paper at arm's length and read in a clear voice: "It is high crime and misdemeanor for any person to wade, paddle, swim, dive or duck in the waters of any irrigation ditch. It is furthermore against the law for the horses, cattle, burros, mules, sheep, swine or goats of the community to appear unattended upon a public street or to take a drink from a public *acequia.* It is against the law for any man, woman or child to throw cigarette stumps or cigar butts or any other form of trash into an irrigating ditch; or to dam up a ditch."

Tio Tejon folded the paper, tucked it back inside his coat and puffed importantly. Now the stranger would see. Perhaps the letters on the proclamation did not mean anything to Tio, but he knew the words they spelled. Margarita, his daughter, had read the words many times until Tio Tejon could say them well and no one could tell but what he read from the paper. Men were impressed when Tio read the paper. This Americano would be, too. He dug out the paper and handed it to the stranger to see for himself.

THE stranger took the proclamation, glanced over it, then wadding it in a ball tossed it into the waters of the *acequia.* As if this were not enough, he took the *cigarro* he was smoking from his mouth and threw that too into the ditch. "Get out of the way, greaser," he said then. "I got no time to waste with you." He gigged his horse and started up the bank of the ditch toward the little town of El Paso. Tio Tejon darted forward and snatched the bit of the horse. The little old Mexican's eyes were afire.

"You have broke the law, Señor," the *alcalde* said. "It is my duty to take you to the council!"

The stranger threw himself from the saddle. He hit the ground running and smashed his full weight against the little Mexican. The horse reared and plunged off the side of the ditch. Lifting Tio from the ground the stranger hoisted the ditch tender over his head and tossed him into the middle of the ditch.

Tio hit the water with a gasp, and as his head came up again he saw the stranger swing into the saddle, jerk the horse savagely and spur the jaded animal down the winding road that followed the ditch into El Paso.

Tio pulled himself dripping up the slippery side of the ditch. As he did he saw Alberto and young Juan Hermes standing there watching. Alberto was big and fat, and he threw back his head and laughed loudly. Juan Hermes ran forward to help.

"Look at Tio," Alberto roared. "Already he breaks his own laws! He is swimming in the *acequia!*"

"You had best hold your tongue, Alberto," Juan Hermes said, tugging at Tio.

"Let the ass bray," Tio said haughtily. He wrung the water from his coat sleeves and from the legs of his trousers. With head held high he said, "Come, Juan. Let us go

to my house where we do not hear the chatter of this monkey."

Juan Hermes held back, hanging his head shyly. "Thank you, Señor Tejon," he said. "I think perhaps it is best—"

"You are like a calf without a mother," Tio scoffed. "Do you expect to win over Morales when you do not even come to see Margarita? Such a lover you are!"

Juan grinned, his lips lifting from even white teeth as his face wrinkled with half-sad resignation. "Margarita is a girl who thinks she knows her mind," he said.

"Pooh!" Tio exploded. "No woman knows her mind. You come with me."

They walked in silence, Tio hitching at his soggy wet clothes, striding in a crab-like sidewise step, and the young man straight and tall, a mask of worry on his face, walking along beside.

They both saw the white horse with the silver mounted saddle standing with reins dragging near the door of Tio's cottage, but neither commented. To himself Tio thought, "That Carlos Morales. I will have to speak to Margarita." But inwardly he knew it would be hopeless. His daughter Margarita was not only the most beautiful girl in El Paso, but she was also the one most likely to do exactly what she pleased.

They saw Carlos Morales ride away before they reached the house, but had they not, one look at Margarita would have told them he had been there. She was lovely, her oval face alive with devilment above the white of her tight bodice dress.

"Papa mio!" she called, running down the path to greet her father. Then in studied casualness, "And Juan. You here too. How very nice." She gave Juan a smile such as one gives a child—the face smiling while the eyes remain preoccupied. Turning again to her father she seemed to notice his wet clothes for the first time. "Father," she said, trying to suppress a giggle. "You have slipped and fallen into the ditch again!"

"Get me dry clothes," Tio said testily. "Do you want me to die of the cold?"

"Cold, father?" she teased. "It is quite warm, really. July, no?"

Tio Tejon chewed viciously on unspoken words. Of course it was July, but need she remind him? This daughter of his. She tried always to tease him and always she succeeded. "What is the meaning of having Carlos Morales here when you are alone?" he roared, wishing to strike back at her. She turned on him, dark eyes snapping.

"You and Juan," Margarita accused. "Always you criticise. Well it would interest you to know that today Carlos Morales asked me to marry him!"

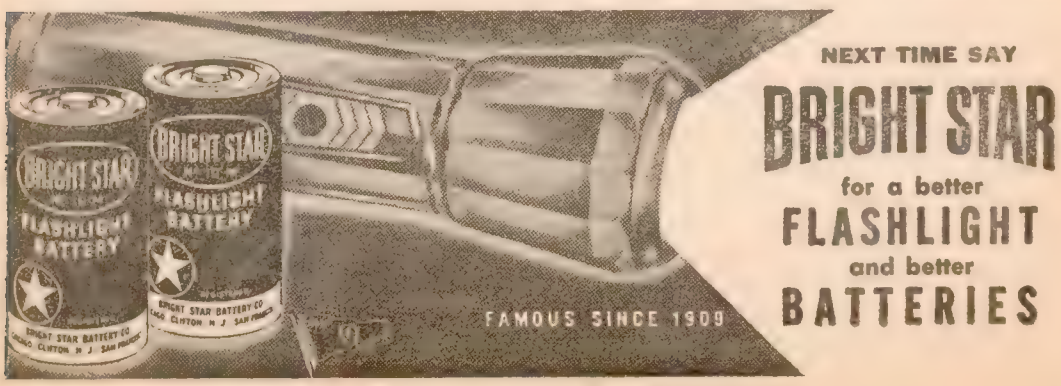
Tio Tejon stood speechless, his jaw sagging.

"Margarita," Juan Hermes said, disbelief coloring his tone. "He asked you—he did not talk to your father first?" Juan's voice exploded. "What sort of a man is he?"

"He is the sort of man who does things," Margarita snapped back. "He does not stand still like the toad in the pond."

"Margarita!" Tio roared, recovering his voice. "I forbid you to see this man!"

"You forbid?" Margarita stormed. "I should care. If you do not give me your blessing then I shall ride away with Carlos without your blessing!" Her skirts swirled as she hurried into the house. Tio Tejon stood for a long time, his head bowed. There were tears in his eyes.



"Juan," he said, "this little one is much in need of a good spanking."

There were no tears in Juan Hermes' eyes. Instead there was a sullen smoldering light that reminded Tio of the look in the bull's eye when he is pawing the dirt and deciding which way to lunge.

Along the winding course of the *acequia* between Magoffinsville and El Paso lay the vineyards and the fields of the farmers, and close to the high bank, following each turn, were the deep rutted trails of the wagon trains from San Antonio. It was along this rutted road that Tio Tejon rode his mule to the town of El Paso.

He rode silently, deep in his thoughts, and it was not until he was on the broad well kept stretch of street where the horse races were held that he realized that something was going on. There was not a single man on the streets of El Paso, but excitement crackled from every seam of Uncle Ben Dowell's saloon down at the corner. Tio pursed his lips and cocked his head to one side. More Fourth of July. Such a fuss. He did not like it. The *junta* in the spring when the men gathered to clean the *acequia* was the most important celebration of the year. Was not he, Tio, in charge of the *junta?* And this Fourth of July. Poof! No one had even asked him for an opinion. So they celebrated already, eh? He would give them some sober thoughts.

It would be good, he thought, dismounting from the mule, to walk into the saloon and have all men greet him by name. It was a fitting thing for an *alcalde*. Perhaps he would have just one small *vino del pais* with the Mayor and the council while he told them of the lawless gringo.

A wall of voices, laughter, and smoke-fogged coolness bulged into the street when he opened the door. Ay! he thought, they drank much and talked loud, these men who planned the celebration. It was too bad he must spoil it all with news of trouble. Near the bar he saw Mayor Jones talking to Uncle Ben Dowell who yawned into a glass and polished it on his sleeve. Tio made his way there. He had some trouble attracting the Mayor's attention, and it was only when he shouted "There is bad trouble!" that the Mayor sat down his glass and called for quiet.

"What is it, Tio?" the Mayor asked, alarmed. "The ditch—?"

Tio Tejon puffed his chest and smacked his lips over his importance. That *gordo* Alberto! That fat one! Ay! If he could be here now. And Margarita, too. Perhaps she would not be so quick to disrespect his wishes if she could see the importance of her father. He saw that the Mayor and the others were waiting impatiently.

"Today a stranger came to our city," Tio Tejon said, savoring each word. The crowd shifted uneasily, and Mayor Jones motioned for the old ditch tender to go on.

"Hurry up, Tio," someone broke in from the back of the saloon. "What's the trouble?" Tio Tejon raised his hand.

"I read to him the law," Tio said, "but he would not obey. Then I try to lead him to Señor Magoffin and the council and—" He paused here, the shame of being tossed into the ditch too much for him. Raising his hand to shoulder height and shaking his finger at the room, Tio Tejon summoned every bit of oratory he possessed and said, "This pig of a stranger has broke all the laws; he has watered his horse in the *acequia* and he has thrown in paper and the cigar stub! We must arrest him and put him in the jail at once!"

Before he finished speaking men had started talking. "Tio," the Mayor scolded. "You gave us a start." He picked up his glass, chuckling to himself. To Uncle Ben Dowell behind the bar the Mayor said, "I'll put that roan mare of mine against any of them." And Tio Tejon was alone.

Near the back of the room Tio could see his old friend Joseph Magoffin. The Mexican's eyes lighted. Here was someone to talk to—someone that would understand. These others had become as crazy men since they had decided on the Fourth of July celebration. Perhaps they had had too much at the bar of Uncle Ben Dowell. He walked over and laid his hand on Joseph Magoffin's sleeve. Magoffin looked down at him.

"It is just that I do not understand, Señor Magoffin. They all turn from me—. I do my job—I tell them of the *gringo* who has broke the law. It is the same law you make in your council—" He looked up, fear in his eyes. "Is it that I am not a good *alcalde?*"

Joseph Magoffin's face crinkled in a smile, and his hand grasped the old ditch tender's shoulder. "Don't you worry, Tio," he said. "It is just that at the moment we

have some very big things to decide. There is a General coming to our celebration—" He watched the old Mexican's eyes for a moment, then said. "Tell you what. Until this celebration business gets straightened out, you take full charge—just like the *alcalde* in the old days. You see that the ditch is in good shape. We wouldn't want the General to find a broken ditch bank, would we Tio?"

For a long time Tio Tejon looked at the tall man standing beside him. Then a grin tunneled out of his deep brown eyes and spilled all over his crinkled face. "There has never been a broken ditch bank when a Tejon was *alcalde,*" he said proudly. "The General will find the finest *acequia* in all the State of Texas." He took Magoffin's hand and shook it vigorously, then slamming on his sombrero he hurried for the door.

TIO paid little attention to the knot of men across the street until he recognized the voice of the stranger who had defiled the *acequia.* The man was talking in a loud tone and his hands were waving. Quickly Tio studied the faces of the other men. They were all strangers, newly come to El Paso. He remembered having seen each of them riding singly up the ditch in the past few days. It was then he saw Carlos Morales, Margarita's flashy one from across the river. Carlos was with the others, and he was nodding vigorously in agreement with the thin faced stranger.

Tio started across the street when a tug at his sleeve made him turn. It was Juan Hermes, and he nodded knowingly toward the stranger. "The man is a trader," Juan said quickly. "He has come to El Paso to buy the goods of the wagon train that now comes from San Antonio. It is driven by your friend Clayborne."

"Clayborne has always been able to sell his goods in El Paso," Tio reminded. "Why does this stranger come here to trade?"

"The Americano has money," Juan explained. "He wished to take the train on to Santa Fe where he will sell the goods at a profit. Carlos Morales goes along as his assistant."

"I do not like the looks of this stranger," Tio protested. "Have you heard his name?"

"It is Gatch Ligget," Juan said. Then worried, "You are not going to put him in the jail? Is it not good to have Carlos Morales go to Santa Fe?"

A slow grin covered Tio Tejon's face. "Ay, Juan. You are the smart one. If Carlos goes to Santa Fe he will not be here for the *baile* on the Fourth of July, is this not so?"

Juan's dark face flushed and Tio laughed merrily. "Do not worry, Juan," he said. "I have decided it is not good to have men in the jail when the General arrives."

Juan Hermes said, "Thank you, *alcalde.* You are a wise one."

Tio watched the young man hurry down the street. There was a new quickness about Juan's walk. For a moment Tio stood and studied the group of men across the street, the tall gaunt frame of the man called Gatch Ligget tormenting his memory. Then he turned and headed back toward the Magoffinsville and Fort Acequia.

He did not take his mule, for it was pleasant, walking along the *acequia* in the evening like this.

As the sun dropped lower a light haze of insects settled close to the placid waters of the ditch. Here and there blue winged dragon flies chased each other through the humming swarms of insects. Then plainly, over the quiet, came the sound of voices—the creak of many wheels—the pop of bull whips. It was the wagon train, coming down the deep rutted *acequia* road. Tio Tejon's pace quickened. His friend Clayborne was coming with his heavily laden wagons. There would be a bit of silk for Margarita tonight, and there would be a bottle wine shared with a friend. He liked this Clayborne. He was a smart one. He did not drive with oxen. The best *mulas* in the country pulled the wagons of Clayborne. Tio broke into an ambling run.

At the place where he had worked this morning and left his shovel, Tio stopped. Here was a good place to watch, for the wagon track passed directly below him. He could see the train now—ten wagons—with the armed guard riding at the lead and tailing up the rear. There on the seat of the first wagon sat Clayborne, his big frame blotting out the opening in the bowed canvas behind him. Tio waved and called down a greeting.

Clayborne stood up in the wagon, his size looming against the fast purpling desert.

"Hiya, Tio!" he bellowed. "Did you save

a bottle of your very special wine for me?"

"Si!" Tio called back. "You come to supper with me tonight, no?"

The wagons were close now, the mules straining against their harness. Clayborne's voice was loud and clear as it came up to Tio, there on the high bank of the ditch. "I will if I'm here," he said. "The way you're leaning on that shovel you're liable to cut the ditch bank and drown out my whole outfit!"

Tio Tejon laughed merrily. That was a good joke. Then his eye was taken by another figure. Margarita had come from the house and was running along the ditch bank in the direction of the wagon train. Tio called to her, but the girl did not hear, or if she did, she paid no heed.

He watched her, light as a young deer, reach the first wagon and saw her running along, her face lifted up to talk with Clayborne. Then without stopping the wagon Clayborne reached down, scooped the girl in his arms and lifted her to the seat beside him. Tio scowled. That Clayborne. He had always spoiled Margarita, ever since she was a little one—bringing her pretty things and making a doll of her.

After the train was gone there was light yet, and would be for awhile. Tio took his shovel and started slicing at the tall weeds that grew along the bank of the *acequia*.

It was dark now and soon it would be time for Clayborne and Margarita to return. He stuck the shovel in the bank where he would find it in the morning. There would be lots of work to do in the morning. Taking his rifle from its hiding place by the cottonwood Tio started toward his house. It was then he heard the unmistakable sound of gun-fire coming from the town of El Paso. It was not the sound of someone with too much *vino* shooting out the windows. It was the snarling angry sound of many guns in battle.

THE shouting of voices and the rumble of wagons being driven too fast cracked sullenly against the still air. Far up the *acequia* the white tops of the Conestogas came into view, swaying drunkenly as the wheels took to the ruts of the wagon road back to San Antonio. And it was then that the face of Gatch Ligget flashed into Tio's memory. He remembered that face now—he had seen it on the handbills that the council received. Gatch Ligget was the renegade half-breed who had incited the Apaches at Escondido Springs under the chief Espejo. This train was not being bought from Clayborne—it was being stolen—being taken back down the river toward Ysleta ford where they could cross the border!

Tio closed his eyes and prayed silently for guidance, and when he opened his eyes his hands were clutching the handle of the shovel, his knuckles strangely white there in the dim light. He looked first at the shovel—then at the broad bank of the *acequia* which had never been broken in all the time a Tejon had been *alcalde*. The sound of the wagons grew louder, and as he stood there, staring down at the deep ruts of the road below him he knew what he must do.

He said a prayer as he dug the blade of the shovel into the matted bank of the *acequia*. The ground felt spongy under the thrust and Tio sobbed in desperation. Then he threw his full weight against the blade again, and the shovel bit through the matted sod with a heartening crunch. Tio strained his back against the weight, and the sod ripped loose, leaving a jagged hole. Encouraged, he flew at his task like a mad man, while the wheels of the Conestogas rumbled nearer and nearer.

It seemed the wagons were upon him before the first trickle of water cut through the small opening in the ditch bank. But it was easier then, and in seconds a good head of water was spilling down the steep bank and snaking in twin rivulets into the wagon ruts. Again and again he plunged the shovel into the opening. The breath beat in his lungs and his back cried out that he was too old for such a task. But the break in the bank widened, and at last the pent up power of the placid *acequia* plunged through the gap and spilled in a swirling flood into the detent of the wagon road. Almost at the same instant the lead wagon careened around the turn and the mules splashed into the first muddy froth of the broken ditch. Tio dropped his shovel, snatched up his rifle and fired twice in rapid succession. The two lead mules dropped, and the swirl of muddy water cascaded over the tangle of beasts and harness.

Standing there in the lead wagon Tio could see the distorted features of Gatch Ligget. Tio saw the pistol snake from the

renegade's waist-band and he heard the roar as the bullet smacked into the mud at his feet. Carefully, Tio shouldered the rifle and took good aim. He saw Gatch Ligget's gun flash again, but the old man did not waver as he squeezed the trigger. A sickness siezed him as he saw Gatch Ligget pitch from the seat of the wagon, then disappear under the muddy waters of the broken *acequia.*

The second wagon had piled up against the first now. There was no mistaking Carlos Morales as the driver. One could tell by his clothes. He stood with a rifle at his hip. Tio gasped, the rifle slipping from his numbed fingers as if he had suddenly been struck in the spine. Crouched there on the seat, face white in the gathering dusk, was Margarita—his *paloma.* He heard the roar of Carlos Morales' gun and felt the lead whistle by his head as he lurched drunkenly down the bank toward that white topped wagon.

He was near where the dead mules lay sprawled, the muddy water pluming up in a smother of foam over their broad still sides, when he first knew there was someone come to help him. He turned to see the tight bloodless face of Juan Hermes. They said nothing, these two, but together they grasped the wheel of the Morales wagon and pulled themselves to the seat. Lead splintered the spokes under their hands.

Tio had just time to clutch Margarita in his arms before the bodies of Juan Hermes and Carlos Morales clashed, they swayed there above them. Margarita's tear-damp face was close to his, her words childishly pleading.

"Papa mio. Forgive me. I wanted only to make Juan jealous. Then Carlos would not let me go—" Her voice broke sharply as the fighting men crashed to the floor of the wagon, then rolled over the side and into the swirling water. Tio and Margarita could see them thrashing there in the dark streaked foam. There was the chilling glitter of a knife in the hand of Carlos Morales. Margarita screamed. Then it was over. Juan Hermes stood up, the knife in his hand slowly sliding free.

Tio snatched up the Sharps rifle Morales had dropped and turned to fight, but there was no need. The renegade freighters had scattered, some heading across the flat desert, some climbing the bank of the *acequia.* And as they ran they fell like prairie hay before the sickle. Over the crack of gun-fire Tio could hear the shouts of the men of El Paso as they charged down the road.

IT WAS of Clayborne that Tio first asked when Joseph Magoffin came to him. Magoffin laughed. "Is that your answer there?" he asked, pointing.

From down the bank came a bandage swathed figure of a man, looking huge against the half-risen moon. Tio recognized his old friend. In each hand Clayborne carried a long tapered bottle.

Magoffin turned to leave, then said, "Don't let your men take too long in fixing the ditch. The Fourth of July is next week, and we'll be needing you to help us run the *fiesta."*

"Ay! Chihuahua!" Tio squealed in disbelief. "Did you hear this, Clayborne? He is not mad because the ditch is broke! I am to run the Fourth of July! A fat Mexican put down his shovel and pressed both hands against the small of his back. Tio Tejon roared a command. "Hey, you, Alberto, you *gordo.* Get to work, fat one!"

The fat one looked up with a face that was pained. When he spoke his voice was sad with whipped resignation.

"Si, alcalde," he said.

"I need a drink," said Clayborne.

And while the two friends sat there, the long tapered bottles pressed to their lips, Alberto labored with his shovel. Once, over the noise of the men working to repair the ditch, came a long indignant squeal, and a sound like a stick slapping the muddy bank. Tio and Clayborne got to their feet.

Far down the bank, outlined against the moon that was slowly hoisting itself out of the desert, Juan Hermes sat. Across his lap was the struggling form of Margarita. They could plainly see Juan's hand rising and falling and could hear the squeals of protest. Then Juan got to his feet and pulled Margarita roughly into his arms. For a long time he kissed her, and at last he let her go. But she did not leave. She stayed close, her arms tight around his neck.

Tio Tejon studied his wine philosophically, an owlish grin twisting his mouth.

"She has been needing this for some time," he said at last. "Let us drink."

BATTLE OF LAST CALL RANCH

By MICHAEL OBLINGER

WHERE the Finley River rolls down toward the Peace, huge hills with jagged teeth saw into the mighty British Columbia plateau where Monty Drew's Last Call ranch bellows its defiance to a wilderness overrun with wolves, grizzlies, caribou, wild horses and unfriendly Babines.

Monty's ten thousand acres supple forage for six hundred weather-scorched cows and steers, mostly scrub stock, and an odd and wild assortment of cayuses, caribou, mountain goats and a few woods' buffalo.

When Monty started out to show what an enterprising young cow-puncher from Montana could do in a land that still wore its maiden-whiskers, he'd overlooked a few bets. Up in these parts, in order to be successful, one had to be a failure first.

So he was a plumb failure for three years. Then he met Stub Massey.

Massey rode in on the spring thaw, tailing two pack horses, the Chinook at his back and a warm sun sinking its golden prongs into his slightly shrunken features. To Monty, Stub looked like the sawed-off end of something that had been shriveling in the cold and drying in the heat so long it had lost its original shape and texture. There was no age to him; he might be young or he might be old. His chin sprouted a rusty red. His eyes were squinty from snow glare in winter and water glare in summer. He wore a kind of toque or cap on a bushy, elongated head. Stub's lips were cracked but Monty noticed the friendly shape of his mouth.

"Good God," Monty greeted him, "you're the first white man I've seen in months. I'll help you unsaddle, then we'll go in and chaw."

The man sat his pony, squinting around him. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off Monty's lay-out, the big ranchhouse, bunkhouse, corrals, barns and sheds.

Presently he spoke: "What you got here?"

"Cattle ranch."

"This far north! By gallop, ain't that something!"

"I'm not so sure," Monty replied.

Stub Massey got off his horse, wonderingly. "Last time I passed here," he said, some Cree hunters had struck camp right on this site." He paused. "How you deliver your cattle to market?"

"Overland. Grazing as we go."

"That takes weeks!"

"It takes a month."

Stub looked up into Monty's grey, brooding eyes. "Why you come so fer?" he asked. "There's lots o' grazing closer to the C.N.R."

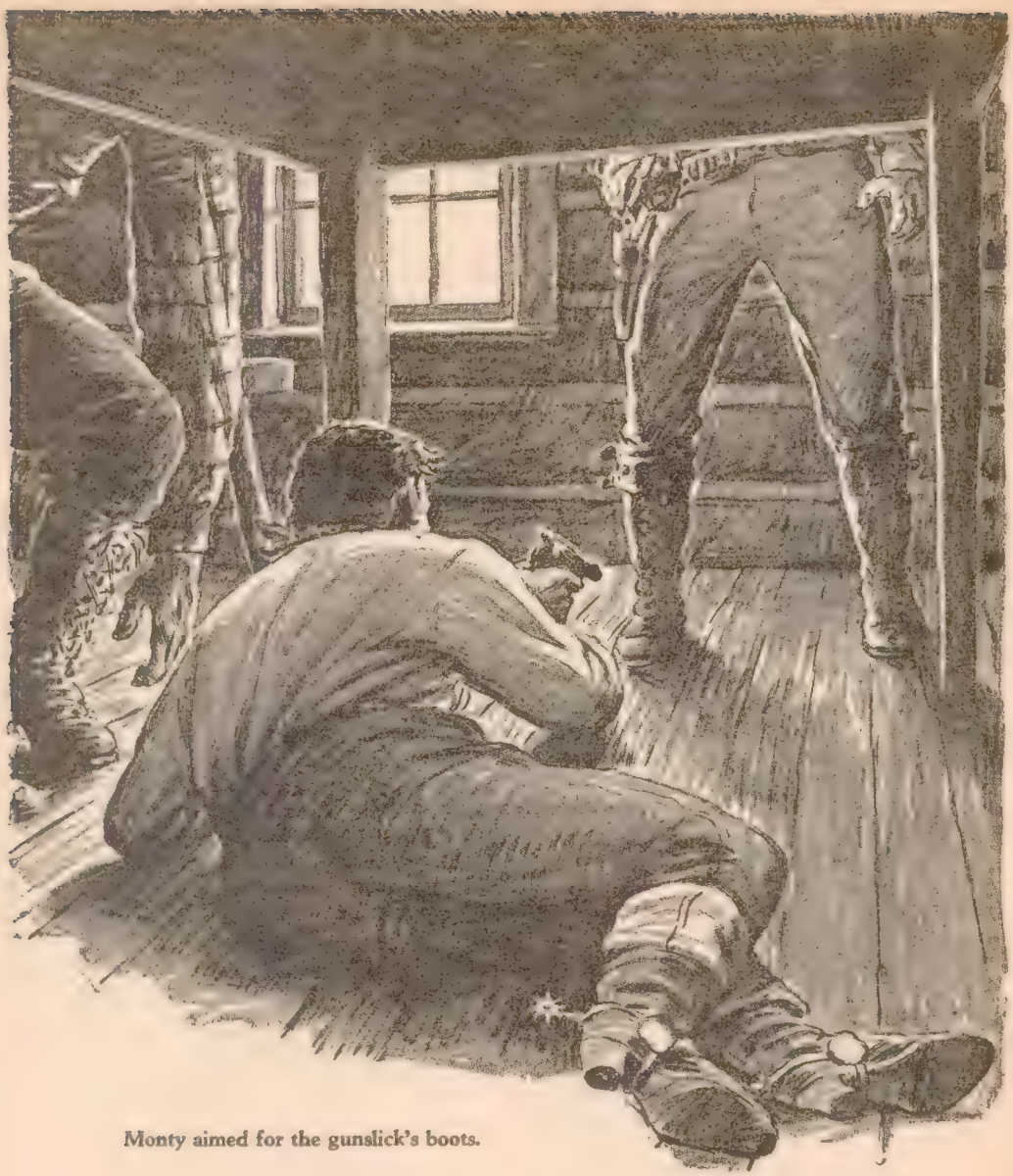
"I craved room," Monty said. "I wanted to be a pioneer, start from scratch, build up the biggest ranch in the world." His laugh was brittle. "I had tall ideas three years ago.

THEY exchanged names, then they unsaddled, stabled the three cayuses and went into the house. Stub carried a saddlepack and rifle. Monty helped him with a tarp-covered bedroll and grubsack.

"I hope you'll stay a spell, Massey. Hell's fire, is it good to see somebody beside a Babine or wandering Cree. Where you heading for?"

"No place particular," Stub replied. "Just movin', that's all."

They entered the big living room and dropped their packs to the hand-hewed floor. Across the room, a ten-foot-wide stone fire-place gulped hungrily at a pile of mixed birchwood and spruce. Bearskins and moosehides adorned the walls. Curing pemmican hung from the massive center ridgepole. A wide open doorway on the right gave a view of the kitchen, with its large castiron range, working table and



Monty aimed for the gunslick's boots.

Young Monty Drew was a very understanding cowpoke. When he was told that all successful ranchers were failures at first, he promptly became the worst failure that Northern frontier had ever known. . . . But when both fast-shooting mounties and warring savages declared him Boothill bait, the tough-luck rancher figured it high time to dissent—with guts and gunsmoke!

kitchen sink. An old Indian woman peered in at them and Monty held up two fingers.

"Fry some eggs and bacon, mama," he said. "A big slab of steak and roll out some hot biscuits."

Stub Massey dropped down on a bench.

"I'll be dog-dinged!" he said.

"What's the matter?"

"It's just like a hotel."

Monty scowled. "The way I feel today," he said, "you can have the hotel, six hundred head of scrubs, ten thousand acres of land and all the headaches thrown in for around ten bucks."

"What's the trouble?"

"I'm thinking of quitting," Monty said. "I started out big. Too damn big. I haven't sold a single hoof nor hide yet. No profits. All losses. My bunch has dwindled to about half what I started with."

"Wolves?" Stub asked quietly.

"Wolves!" Monty snorted. "Holy hell, if you could see them come. If there was any money selling wolf pelts, I'd be rich. Wolves in the winter, grizzlies in the summer, and the Babines all the time."

Stub Massey shifted around on the bench. He closed one eye.

"The Babines have plenty of fish an' caribou," he said. "They shouldn't ought to bother you."

"No, they shouldn't."

"Then what's wrong?"

Monty let him have it. "Everything," he said. "To begin with, they don't want me here. But I stuck and that riled 'em. Then they acquired a taste for steer. It's easier to come and get a steer than go chasing after caribou. Why bother to drop a net for fish, when all they have to do is drop a leather noose over a young calf and haul him away for skookum-pot in the bush?"

Stub's fingers made a curious snarl in his lap. He said, "If you should shoot one, you'd have to shoot them all."

"That's right," Monty nodded.

"Who you got watchin' your herd?"

"Four Cree riders. Good boys. But the Babines got the old Nick scared stiff out of all three."

The Indian cook entered with plates, cups, knives and forks on a wooden tray and a cloth draped over one arm. Stub Massey watched her set the table. He moistened his lips and sniffed hungrily.

"Just like a hotel," he repeated.

"I'll sell it to you for a song," Monty said.

"How loud I got to sing?"

Monty laughed. "Pay me fifty dollars a head for what's left of my herd, and I'll throw in the rest."

Massey seemed to be considering it. He rubbed his chin.

"You wouldn't want a pardner?" he asked. "I think I could handle them Babines, if you'd handle my end of it."

Monty rose, staring. "By God, that never occurred to me. What do you mean, your end?"

"I got problems, too," Massey confessed. "Look! If you'd take on my troubles and let me take on yours, mebbe it would change our luck. Nothin' like tryin'."

"I don't understand," Monty pressed his lips. "Maybe if you'd tell me what you're up against."

"A few minutes ago," Massey said, "you must o' noticed my cayuses was packed light. I cached my load down the hill. I see smoke and couldn't take chances. I been follered fer two weeks."

"Why?"

"I got enough gold to start a mint. Two packloads. First load I fetched out last fall as fer as Deacon Creek when they shot me. I was two days bleedin' on a hill. They got that first load, but this spring I went back fer the second, the last of it."

Monty stopped him. "Wait a minute," he said. "Whoa. I want to get this right. Who are *they?* Who shot you?"

"I never saw them," Stub said glumly. "So how can I tell?"

"White men you think?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"I don't know how many last fall, but this spring there's some white men an' a girl."

"If you didn't see them," Monty objected, "how do you know there is a girl with them."

Massey thrust two hands in front of him, about six inches apart.

"Tracks," he said. "Little ones. You could see they was a girl's. Then I found the bigger prints o' four men."

"Five in the party then?"

"Yep. Them five's follerin' me this spring. I couldn't find no tracks last fall

after I was shot. So I couldn't say the girl was along then. But she's with 'em now."

MONTY sat for a time, studying Stub Massey, wondering whether the information he'd just received was true or not. Massey didn't look like a man who would lie about such important matters, but it could be he was bushed. A mental case. Hardships and suffering had left their marks on him. He'd probably run short of grub. In spite of the fact that he seemed tough and wirey, his body was emaciated, his face wrinkled and shrunken. Might be a good idea to sort of humor him, pretend you believed every word he said.

"What would be my job," Monty asked, "in case we strike a deal?"

"Keep them rats from stealin' the last o' my gold," Massey said.

"Uh-huh. How much is there?"

"More than you can lift all to once."

"My God!" Monty said.

Stub Massey watched the Indian woman reappear with the tray. It was loaded. The smells wafting toward them caused the little prospector to close his eyes and swallow expectantly.

Monty rose, "Let's eat," he said.

Stub picked up his rifle and followed Monty to the table. Pulling out a bench, the little man sat down, rifle across his knees. He faced a front window. Before he drew his plate toward him and picked up his fork, he shot a swift glance outside. For a split second, his features darkened. Then the knotted muscles of his face relaxed.

"Just like a hotel," he said dreamily. "No, it's better. Do you eat like this all the time?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Stub tackled the steak, helped himself to bacon and two eggs, then stacked a hill of mashed potatoes on one side of his plate. He took a sip of coffee, rich with cream. He buttered a biscuit so hot the butter melted and ran over its sides.

"By gallop," he said, his mouth full, "I always wanted to settle down civilized. For ten years I dreamed somethin' like this. You wasn't kiddin' 'bout takin' a pardner, huh?"

"No."

"After dinner," Stub said, "I'll fetch my gold up here an' we can weigh out enough to fix the deal."

Monty blinked. "Yes—yes," he said. "Now take it easy, old man. No hurry. You just eat all you want, but don't get sick. Maybe you'd like to lie down afterwards and rest a bit. You look tired."

"Can't sleep much bein' follered all the time," Stub told him. "I was afeared to make a fire. So I et what I had raw."

Monty had begun to pity Stub now. The hallucination of being followed was common in cases of this kind. Perhaps with food and rest, the poor devil might pull out of it.

Someone knocked on the door. Massey jumped, grabbing his rifle.

"Sit down," Monty said soothingly. "It's one of my cowhands. The foreman usually drops in around noon." He turned his head and yelled, "Come in!"

Two men came in fast. Monty stared

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into the muzzle of a gun. A second revolver was levelled at Stub. The last man kicked the door shut. For a moment there was silence.

"Keep your hands on the table," a burly voice said. "Don't move! We're going to search the house."

"It must be here," the other man said.

Stub Massey turned his shrivelled face toward Monty.

"Two of 'em," he said.

MONTY quietly appraised the two figures near the door. Big men, grim and tough. One had clean-shaven cheeks, a blue flannel shirt and tie. Monty noticed the broad nose and flaring nostrils. That hombre had a killer's face if he ever saw one. The other man was as thick-set as a slab of cement. A soft felt hat sat forward on his head, shading the close-spaced eyes.

The man wearing the blue flannel shirt, walked over and hefted Massey's bedroll. He put it down and cursed. He strode toward Massey.

"Where did you hide that stuff?"

"Back in the bush, you danged fool," Stub answered softly. "It's cached where you'll never find it. Nobody but me ever will."

"Damn you, speak up or I'll blast you!"

Stub Massey bit into a biscuit. "Shoot!" he said.

Reaching over, the big man tapped the prospector's skull with his gun. Massey sighed, dropped his head into his plate. Mashed potatoes and the remains of an egg spattered over the cloth.

That was too much for Monty. He grabbed the meat platter, hurling it at Stub's assailant. Before he realized exactly what he was doing, he jerked up the table and slid underneath. He saw a pair of legs. He heard a shot.

The man opposite screeched. "Get him!"

There was another shot. Monty grappled with a pair of legs, heaved and swore. The man who'd struck the little prospector crashed down, bumping his head. The fellow was covered with gravy. A portion of steak had lodged into the open front of his shirt. He was momentarily stunned. Monty was so mad now he opened up from a prone position on the floor—two slugs into two big feet, then a third at the arm holding the gun.

Frantically, Monty's standing target flung open the door and bolted. He made bloody tracks. Monty rose, turning his attention to the other man, just sitting up.

"I warned you!" Monty growled.

Still in a fury, he grabbed the big fellow's collar and dragged him outside. There he cuffed him, whirled him around and sent him off, reeling, with a parting kick.

"Next time, damn you, you won't even walk. So help me, if I ever catch sight of you again, I'll—I'll—"

Monty didn't finish. The man couldn't hear him, anyway. He was running like mad. But coming around the corner of the house was something—someone, or maybe he was suffering from illusion. Or else—

Then he remembered what Stub Massey had told him. Yes, there was a girl! He'd vaguely pictured her as the unpleasant dance-hall type. She had to be, running around with a gang of killers and thugs. No decent young lady, like this one looked, would associate with that scum.

She had red hair and blue eyes and both were blazing.

"You brute!" she said. "You—you big senseless bully! Do you know what you've done?"

Monty nodded. "I think so."

She stepped before him, defiantly, and, before he realized what she was doing, she'd slapped his face.

It stung. Anger kindled in him.

"If you try that again, I'll spank you," he said.

She backed away.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Monty said. "A nice looking girl like you associating with a bunch of crooks."

"I'll have you understand," the girl said hotly, "I'm with my father. We're on our way to Prince George. And Mr. Hartness and Mr. Callon and Sergeant Karls are certainly not crooks!"

"Sergeant Karls!"

"He's a mounted policeman."

WHEELS had begun to chug in Monty's head. He felt kind of funny inside. Had he been mistaken about Stub Massey after all? How the devil could an honest-looking, genuine, down-to-earth prospector like Stub be anything but what he appeared to be?

Then, suddenly, Monty had it. His origi-

nal suspicion that suffering and loneliness had somewhat unhinged the prospector's mind, must be the real solution. Stub Massey was insane. As they said down across the border—loco. He wasn't responsible for his acts. He had hallucinations. He actually believed the gold he had stolen was his.

Pressing his lips, Monty looked at the girl.

"Miss, maybe I owe you folks an apology. If Sergeant Karls had come here instead of those two gunslicks," Monty told her sourly, "I wouldn't have made a fuss. I hate to be ordered around in my own house. I do, for a fact, miss. When they came in pointing their guns and swearing they meant to search the place, I got mad. Can you blame me?"

"Well," the girl hesitated, faintly smiling, "I suppose not. Buck Hartness and Jud Callon aren't very diplomatic at times. But they mean well. They are both good men."

"Those good men almost died young," Monty said pointedly. "Where's Sergeant Karls?"

"He's with father."

"And where's he?"

"They're both coming," the girl said. "Father took ill. Sometimes he gets dizzy spells and then either Sergeant Karls or I have to hold him in the saddle."

"You're welcome to bring him here, miss," Monty offered. "The place is yours. I've got plenty of room."

"Thank you."

Monty liked the way she smiled. It lighted her whole face.

"What's your name, miss?"

"Paula Claire. My father is Robert Claire, a mining engineer. He's been looking over some copper claims on the MacKenzie." She paused. "And you?"

"Montgomery Drew," he flushed. "Monty for short. I'm glad we've got everything straightened out, Miss Claire. Bring your pa here soon as you can."

"You're being very kind to us, Monty."

She turned and walked away. Her pony, he saw, was tied to the corral fence. He watched her until his view was broken by the slope of the hill. Then he went inside, softly closing the door.

STUB MASSEY raised his head from the table.

"Where they go?" he asked thickly. "By gallop, that feller sure pasted me hard."

Monty nodded. "You feeling all right? Look! I've some spare beds. You ought to lie down."

Stub closed his eyes dizzily. "No," he said, "not by a hell sight. Them skunks—"

"They're gone," Monty told him. "I'll take care of them if they should come back. You'll be safe enough. I'll guarantee it."

"You don't think—"

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Monty waved the objection aside. He was dealing with a bushed prospector. No matter what this poor devil might or might not have done, kindness and consideration were what he needed most right now.

Walking over, he placed a hand on the prospector's shoulder. The shirt was threadbare. He could feel the bones sticking up.

"Come on," Monty said softly. "Come on, feller, and I'll fix you right. A nice bunk's waiting for you. A few hours sleep and you'll be good as new."

Massey hesitated, bleery eyes toward the window.

"That hull crowd'll be back next time. An' I don't want to be caught like a rat."

Monty grinned down at him. "We're going to be pardners, aren't we?"

The prospector brightened. "That's right."

"I'm taking care of your end. Don't worry."

"I feel mighty grateful to you."

Monty led his guest to a bedroom off the hall, drew a shade over the window, closed the door and returned to the living room.

His Cree Foreman, John Neso, stood just inside, cheeks spattered with mud. He kept hitching at his belt, swallowing.

Monty recognized the symptoms.

"Those damned Babines?"

"Yes."

"How many this time?"

The Cree had been riding hard. Monty noticed Neso's muscular, walnut-colored neck spasmodically twitching.

Suddenly the Cree found his voice. Two white men come to Babine camp an' stir them up. Babine jump ponies. They go take all the herd. I fix 'em to shoot. Same lak Pierre and Maschiel—they ready too. But the Babine too many. They many shoot for one shoot us. So we run."

Monty swore. "You mean," he said, coldly furious, "the Babines got the nerve, the danged gall, the—the guts to drive off all my cattle?"

Neso gravely nodded.

"By God, no!" Monty lurched to the wall and snatched down a 30-30 Winchester. "I'll say they won't. Scorch their black, thieving hides. I've been patient I've been too easy. But from now on, so help me Caesar, I'll make 'em eat blood!"

"They too much," Neso objected. "Too much for four mens."

Monty snorted. "I'll fight the whole damned tribe! I'll follow them and pick 'em off, one at a time." He paused, scowling toward the door. "Which way did they go?"

Neso pointed. "They rode for the sun. Some do. Some don't."

"What do you mean?" Monty demanded.

"Half the Babines run off the herd. Other half come here this afternoon, they say."

"Come here? What for?"

Neso now hitched at his belt with both hands. "They fire the house," he said, choking. "They burn the corrals. They make this country same lak it used to be."

"Who told you?"

"They yell it to me."

THE BUTT of Monty's rifle banged loudly on the rough floor-boards. He gripped the steeel barrel tightly in one hand. He couldn't follow the herd if part of the Babines were on their way here to burn him out. He had to defend his property, his home. This was the showdown. Trouble had been brewing for a long time. He'd seen it coming. But it maddened him to realize that two white men, travelling in company with Sergeant Karls of the Royal Mounted, had fired the fuse to the explosive keg of Babine resentment and treachery.

He said to Neso, "Are you positive those two white men rode to the Babine camp?"

"Yes."

"Did Pierre and Maschiel ride home with you?"

"They at bunkhouse now."

"Good!" Monty caught up his rifle. "A mounted policeman is coming here, Neso, so we'll have help. Maybe he'll know how to stop 'em. At least, he can stop those chuckle-headed dimwits with them."

Neso nodded. "What you want Pierre, Maschiel and me do then?"

"Get your guns and wait for orders," Monty instructed him. "Karls can take charge when he comes. He's bringing a sick man here. There's a girl, too. She went to meet them."

Neso opened the door.

"Okay. I tell 'em lak you say."

He went out. Monty buckled on his cartridge belt, rammed two six-shooters into their holsters and followed him out on the porch.

Paula Claire, her father and a tall, well-

setup man in service khaki, rode slowly up the hill. As they drew closer, Monty noticed two things, one was that Karls had a handsome face, an impressive pair of shoulders, but a damned poor saddle-seat. He sat stiff, his stirrups laced short. The skirts of his saddle-blanket hung lower at one side. He held the reins in both hands. By far the better horseman was Paula, who reached out to steady her father as the old man's pony stubbed one hoof against a rock.

Monty walked over to help the old man down. Karls and the girl dismounted.

Paula said, "Mr. Drew, I want you to meet my father and Sergeant Karls."

Monty extended a hand toward the policeman. It was ignored. Robert Claire smiled, then gritted his teeth.

"Arthritis," he said. "It *would.* catch me on this trip. Young man, I'm indebted to you for this favor. All right in a few days I think."

Neso took care of the ponies while Monty led the way inside.

Sergeant Karls scowled toward the kitchen. "Hot tea and something to eat," he ordered briskly. Then he said to Paula, "The place looks clean." He paused to sniff. "At least we can stand it for a day or two."

"I think it's wonderful," Paula said. "What huge roof-logs! And such nice hand-made furniture!"

Monty gave instructions to his Cree cook, returned and said to Karls, "The man you want is here, sergeant."

Karls clanked around, his lips tightenig.

"Are Hartness and Callon guarding him?" he snapped.

"No," Monty answered. "They're down on the range stirring up trouble for me. They're leading the Babines up here to burn me out."

"Burn you out!" Paula gasped.

"Yes."

"Why?" Karls demanded.

"Didn't Miss Claire tell you the trouble I had with them?"

Paula blushed. "I thought you could explain better yourself," she said, turning to Monty. "Mr. Drew mistook them for ruffians," she went on, flashing her blue eyes toward Karls. "It was all a mistake."

Monty said, "They got tough and so I got tough."

Karls glared. "They're my deputies," he said. "They were acting on my orders."

"Well, why didn't they say so?" Monty growled. "How was I to know? They just looked like a couple of bushbums to me."

Karls remained silent for a moment, then he strode over, facing Monty. They were standing almost toe to toe.

"It was probably all your fault," he said. "You've made trouble for yourself and trouble for me. Now get this straight: I'm taking charge here. Now where's Massey?"

"Sleeping in one of my rooms."

"Did he bring the gold here?"

"No."

Sergeant Karls stroked his chin. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"I don't lie," Monty retorted, trying to hold himself in. "Look! Let's stop this wrangling and get busy. Soon as you've had your tea," he sniffed, "you might go down and take charge of those two deputies of yours and about forty or fifty howling Babines. They've run my cattle off. Six hundred head. Now they're coming up here to fire my buildings."

"You're only trying to frighten Paula," the mountie said.

"I've always had respect for the mounted police," Monty said. "But if you're a sample—"

"Stop that talk," Karls interrupted, "or I'll place you under arrest."

Monty quieted down, but inwardly his anger smoldered like green logs on a slow fire. He didn't like Karls. He didn't like his attitude or officious manner. No mountie who had ever stopped here on patrol acted so overbearing and conceited. Monty was glad when tea was finished and the mining engineer was made comfortable on a couch in the living room.

AWAITING her chance, Paula stepped over and asked Monty in a low voice, "Is there really danger the Babines will come?"

"You bet there is!"

"Sergeant Karls doesn't seem to think so."

Monty shrugged. "I'm going out to station my boys around the buildings. They'll be armed. Evidently I won't get any help from his nibs!"

"Oh I'm sure you're mistaken," Paula said. "He told me he'd attend to things."

"Then why don't he get a move on?"

"He went to have a word with the prisoner," Paula informed him. "He says it will be safer to have the man handcuffed."

Monty hurried outside, calling his riders. Neso came, then Pierre. They carried rifles. Maschiel joined them, his eyes wide with fear.

"Jus' now I see the Babines from the top o' the hill," he announced. "Some on ponies, part on foot. They be here in few minutes."

"Find rocks out around the hill for cover," Monty ordered. "When they get here, open up. I'll dash in the house and try to fetch that goddamned know-it-all, Sergeant Karls. Maybe when he sees them, he'll believe me."

"The Babines be 'fraid when they see the mountie, "Neso predicted.

Monty turned and ran back into the house, clanked down the hallway and burst into the room where he'd put Stub Massey. For a moment he doubted his eyes. Blind rolled up, the window let in a stream of light. Mossey lay on the bed, handcuffed, and Karls was choking him.

Monty stepped closer. "Take your dirty fingers off that man, damn you!"

Karls whirled, reaching for his gun. Monty hurled his body at the policeman's legs. As they went over, Karls had him by the hair. A powerful fellow, he jerked Monty's head up close to his own chest, dropped an arm over the back of Monty's neck and pressed. It was like a vice squeezing the breath out of him. He struggled desperately, trying to draw up his knees. If only he could get his knees into the man's belly and treadmill his guts. Monty could feel the agony of a straining heart. His eyes were pulling, his head throbbed. He could taste blood.

"You asked for it!"

Karl's voice close to one ear made a mountainous sound like crashing avalanches. Monty heaved and brought a knee up high enough to grind the policeman's groin.

Karls let go. The first draught of cooling air on Monty's parched throat stung like needles. But it gave him the needed strength. Twice his fist smashed into the

upturned face. Then he yanked out a six-shooter and struck Karls squarely between the eyes. He rose, panting.

Stub Massey staggered toward him from the bed.

"You done it!" he said. "A good job. But they'll get you fer it—he's a damned mountie."

"Like hell he is!" Monty choked. "I had my suspicions when I saw him ride up on his horse. A redcoat, they tell me, is one of the best riders in the world. As good as the best cowhand. But this guy was too awkward sitting there, too stiff. He must have stolen that uniform."

"An' mebbe killed the real mountie that was in it?" Stub said.

"Very likely. Karls, Hartness and Callon are a gang of crooks. But that uniform fooled the mining engineer, Mr. Claire, and his daughter, Paula."

SUDDENLY the sound of a rifle shot echoed along the hill. Monty bolted toward the door.

"The Babines!" he shouted. "They're here. Got to go now."

"Wait!" Massey said.

"I can't—"

Monty flung down the hall.

The prospector ran after him, caught Monty's sleeve.

"Stop!" he said hurriedly. "It's my turn. We're pardners ain't we? Didn't I say I would look after your end if you looked after mine?"

Monty hesitated. "Sure you did."

"Then you listen to me." Stub Massey's shrunken face glowed with sudden purpose. "I can handle them Babines, ever' one an' send 'em off packing!"

"How?"

"Easy. Five years ago I married a Babine girl, the daughter of a chief, at the English Mission. They made me a member of the tribe. She died 'bout a year ago, but I still got enough influence to make 'em do just what I tell 'em to."

Monty pushed Stub ahead of him. "All right," he said. "Go!"

Twenty minutes later, Stub Massey came back. He rubbed his grubby hands and grinned.

"You won't never have no more trouble," he said. "They promised to leave our cattle alone. They didn't know I was one of the owners—or will be soon as we fix up the deal."

Monty said, "I'll be damned. You can have that partnership whether you have any gold or not."

"Don't you worry, I got plenty of that shiny stuff."

"And I thought you were crazy," Monty said.

Paula joined them and when Monty had told her what had happened, she, too, seemed convinced that Karls must be an imposter. Later, when the prospector's handcuffs had been removed, Neso came in with the news that Hartness and Callon had been locked up in the ice house.

"What we do wid them now?"

"Leave them there until I can find other quarters," Monty answered. "Tomorrow I'm sending you to Burn's Lake to fetch the police."

On the following Wednesday, Corporal Brackett arrived. At sight of Karls his eyes narrowed.

"This man is wanted for murder," he said. "Shot two homesteaders at Terrace, robbed a Prince Rupert bank. The real Sergeant Karls was after him, and, no doubt, was shot from ambush either by this man, Jud Walloby, or by the others, Hartness or Callon."

Paula Claire shuddered. "It's awful," she said. "I had no idea. To think that father and I travelled for nearly a week with them."

"You had no way of telling," Monty said.

Brackett walked over and grinned down at Massey. "How you doing, Stub? Heard you made a strike. What have you got this time? Gold?"

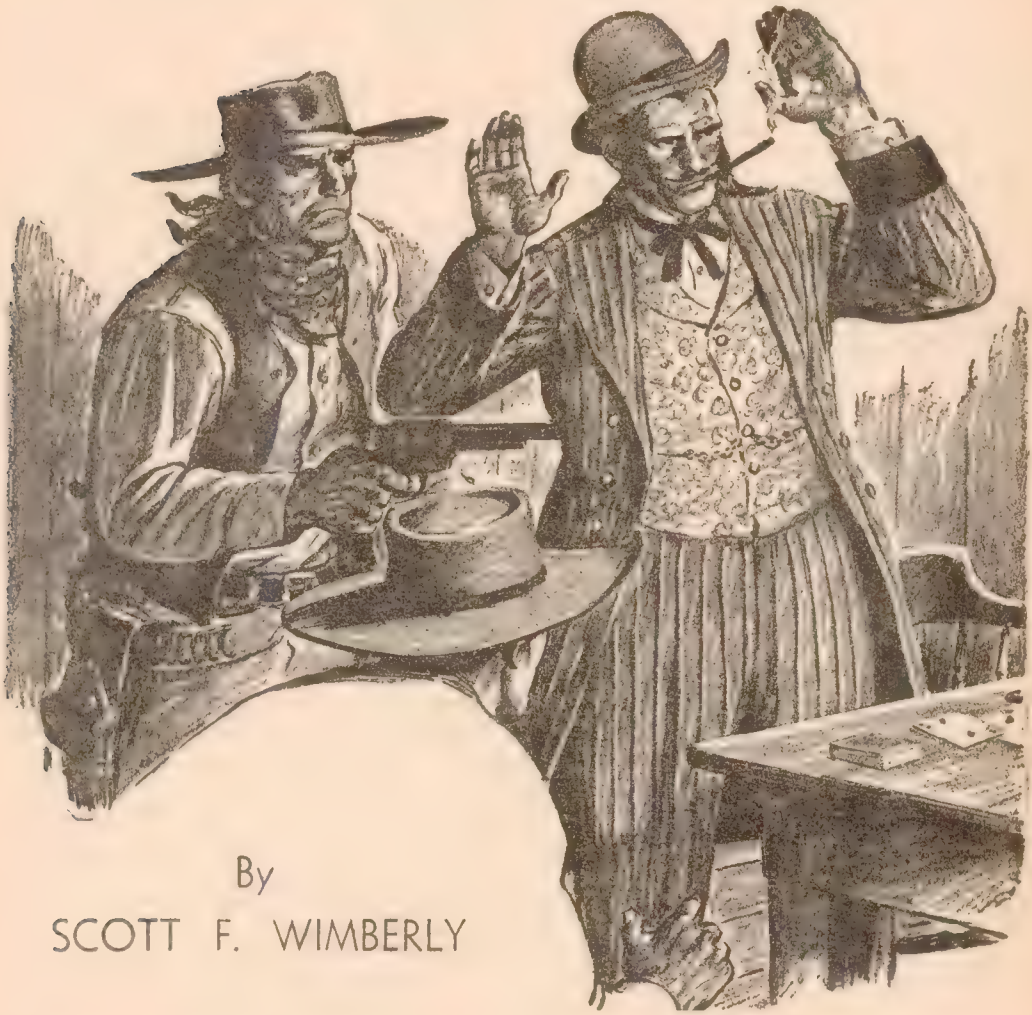
"There was a whole passel of it," the prospector admitted, bobbing his head. "Got more 'an I need this time. I've quit. I'm goin' ranchin'. This here place, corporal, is betetr 'an any hotel. An' Monty says I can buy in."

Paula took Monty's arm, "You'll probably think me a shameless hussy, but I'd like to buy in too."

Monty's only reply was a well placed kiss.

BUTTONS EVANS—

A Roaring Novelette of the Frontier's Most Loveable Tinhorn



By
SCOTT F. WIMBERLY

Buttons Evans, the frontier's gift to women, sadly admitted that throughout his twenty-nine hectic years he had been plagued by one constant allergy: pretty faces. . . . Now, because of one unforgettable smile, he must play out his most risky rôle—in a grim and deadly masquerade with his life forefeit, if he failed to bring down the house!

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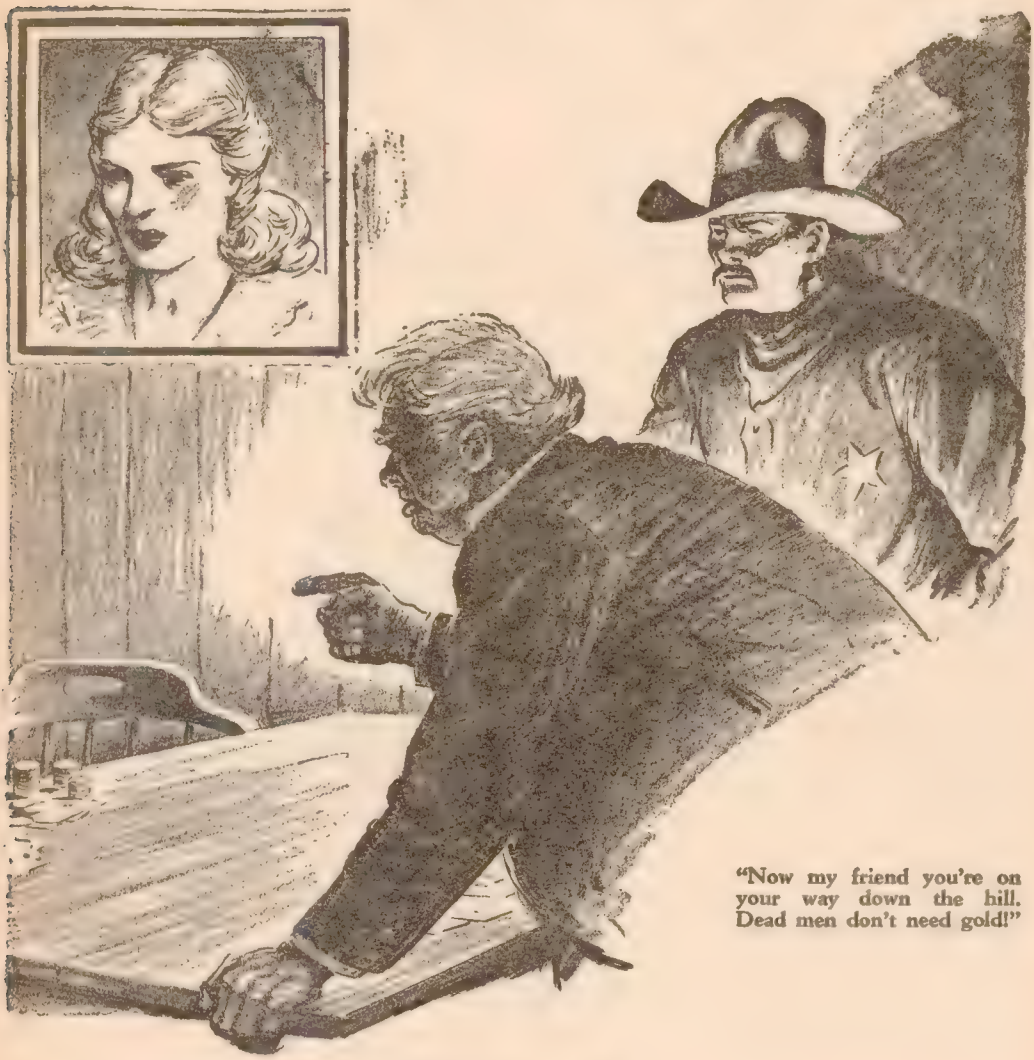

"Now my friend you're on your way down the hill. Dead men don't need gold!"

CHAPTER ONE

Golden Windfall

BUTTONS EVANS threw a quick glance over one wide shoulder to make sure that the last bend in the rocky trail paralleling the deep gorge hid him from the posse. His black eyes saw nothing but red boulders and a roiling dust of his own making. He pulled in his blowing mount, knoting the reins loosely around the saddle horn and throwing one long leg over to dismount hurriedly.

The rising thunder of the weary but irate pursuit came to him as he slapped the pony's rump with a well-manicured hand. The surprised horse lit out again, snorting his anger at the apparent ungratefulness of its late rider.

Buttons threw himself into the doubtful refuge of the ancient rocks which rested precariously on the lip of the canyon. Hell of a jump, he told himself sourly and looked at the blue waters of the Lipan River three hundred feet below, if that posse discovered his ruse soon enough to get him cornered.

Then he flattened his elegant suit into the rocks as the posse roared by amid flying pebbled and blowing horses. He heard their tired, bitter curses above the ring of steel on granite and the squeaks of saddle leather as they squinted red-rimmed eyes against the choking dust. A quick look at their grim faces, and the lean, handsome adventurer decided that a jump into the Lipan was the safest course.

As his pursuers roared out of sight, Buttons arose, resetting his expensive brown derby at a rakish angle and brushing the trail dust from his loud but expensive pinstripe suit. One strong hand gripped his ever-present tan leather suitcase while the other carefully took count of the solid gold buttons on the long coat and cream brocade vest.

Thin lips curved absently in satisfaction under his black wax-pointed moustache. The golden but practical baubles which were his trademark and had earned him his nickname, was all important to the handsome young fleecer. He made no effort to check the presence of his huge diamond ring or heavy watch chain.

He toyed with one of his long black side burns. Keen eyes swept the canyon for a means of descent. None was in sight, so he began to work his way rapidly away from the trail, moving where possible over the hardest ground to hide his trail. His tired pony would soon stop running and the posse would be back, thirsting for his blood.

HIS mind upbraided him bitterly. He been in worse spots, but this was bad enough and could get tougher. One of these days, he would learn to leave pretty females alone. He could not recall one single incident in his whole twenty-nine years in which a pretty face wasn't to blame. His first whaling in school had been caused by a pigtailed temptress who unwittingly exposed his plan to start a gang fight while he would scoop up all his playmates' marbles.

Buttons had entered a sleepy little cow town forty or so miles back several days ago. The settlement had been the site of a famous Indian-Cavalry battle, and the citizens were very proud of the history. Buttons, being low on funds and never at loss to come up with a smooth sucker-baiting plan, dug into his tan suitcase and gathered his equpiment from the amazing array of papers, samples, false credentials, crooked cards and dice. Knickknacks and other devices of deceit.

He posed as a historian and collector of famous relics and pretended to be gathering material for his books.

He became quite popular—especially among the women.

With his glib tongue and nimble brain, he had had what society there was, fighting for his presence as a house guest. Then he struck. In rapid succession, he closeted himself with the moneyed men and matrons, expressing his gratitude for their hospitality and revealing his trump card—a misshapen piece of lead which hung around his corded neck under his clothes on a fancy chain that looked gold but was only a chunk of solid brass.

"My most prized possession," he had explained hesitantly and with well-feigned embarrassment, "The bullet that killed our late, great General Custer!" Buttons Evans had a college professor's command of words when he chose to use it. "I have come to consider you my best friend in your fine city and am sure that I can trust you and enjoy your kind confidence.

"I am temporarily low on funds, my expected check from the East having been delayed. Perhaps, a hundred dollars with this invaluable treasure as a temporary security? This is very embarrassing, but I am sure you will understand.

"But please realize, that I could not part permanently with the bullet. A few days, perhaps, then I will redeem it. And of course, you will save me considerable shame by not mentioning this to a soul. To Hades with that slow mail service!"

The crafty fleecer had produced no less than fifteen identical bullets "that had killed the late great Custer," and had smoothly collected fifteen hundred dollars from the leading citizens who accepted the fake mementoes with oggled eyes and secreted them beneath their clothes.

Buttons had nearly choked with suppressed laughter at the way the "lucky" citizens swaggered and strutted about their business, unconsciously fondling the pieces of lead through their shirts or blouses and giving one another superior, smug and secret looks.

But Buttons knew that sooner or later one of them would burst out with the secret. He prepared to decamp with his ill-gotten gains.

Then came the woman on the scene. She was lovely. She had to be or else she would have never wrecked his plans. There was a spray of enticing freckles frolicing across her little nose. Evidently she was from one of the outlying ranches, because the handsome young crook had not seen her before.

Buttons had rented a mount to "look over the old battlegrounds". He was five miles on the road to escape when he met her. She was out of her buckboard, futilely trying to repair a broken hame strap. Buttons looked, smiled, and showed his glossy black curls as he gallantly tipped his derby and politely threw away his long thin cheroot.

He got the harness into working order, gave her much more assistance than was necessary in getting up into the buckboard, and ended up by tying his mount behind and riding nearly back to town with her.

The sight of the town rang an alarm of warning in his head, so he favored the fair ranch girl with another bullet from Custer's body and stole a kiss. But the woman jinx, which had tripped a many of his schemes, was hard at work.

He looked up from his pleasant task of farewell to discover that a well-mounted band of citizens were under his nose, led by a fat but deadly-looking sheriff who seemed more interested in the nearest tree than the due processes of law. A matron in the town had gushed over to her banker-husband, who had also been duped.

Buttons' dramatic explanation, "That the General's body had had many bullets in it, and that it was debatable as to just which one caused his regretful death," was coldly rejected by the hemp-fevered posse. Only his meek attitude of surrender threw them off guard enough for him to let out a high rebel yell and make a flying leap for his saddle and tear off in a hail of vicious but inaccurate slugs that vied with each other to gain the dubious fame of killing one Buttons Evans. . . .

BUTTONS moved on Indian-fashion through the rocks. But for one cute little girl, he would have been safe, not here in this God-forsaken wilderness. He smiled ruefully as he recalled the girl's soft, sweet lips and the way that she had blushed. Perhaps, the first time she had been kissed, he bragged.

He was hardly more than a quarter of a mile away from the trail when a nasal voice hailed him quietly. The lean adventurer dived behind a boulder, a mean-looking six-barrelled derringer seeming to leap out of his gaudy coat into his hand.

A rider on a wide chestnut mare spurred out of a nest of rocks and paused right on the lip of the gorge. He was as tall as Buttons and as dark. He looked about thirty-five, and there was a loose cruelness about his mouth. He was laughing, and the irritating nasal tone of it told Buttons that this was the hombre who had hailed him.

"I'm not after you, amigo," the rider

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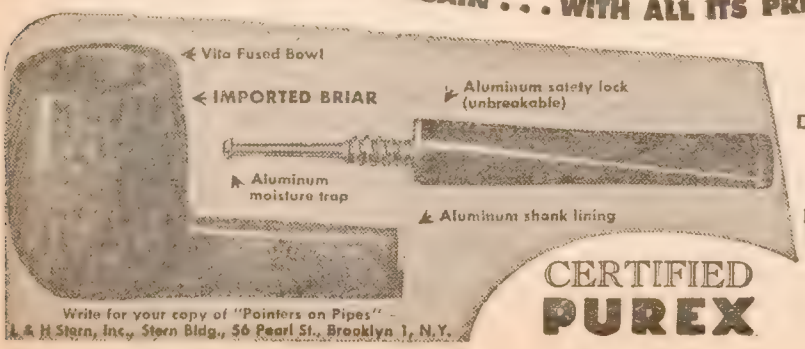

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twanged, but kept his hand near a holstered Navy .45. The chestnut's rigging and the raw-hide hobbles around her neck, told the experienced Buttons that the man was from down Rio Grande way. "I jumped the trail right in front of you when I heard you and that posse beating the ground. I don't hanker to meet them myself."

Buttons stood up and cautiously pocketed his derringer. A fellow fugitive, he decided, and eyed the fresh-looking chestnut with envy.

"For a dude," the man continued, "you sure got the trail-savvy. What's the rub, necktie party?"

A man of lesser understanding would have taken offense at the pointed question. Here in the west, a man's business was his own. The handsome fugitive looked quickly over one shoulder. He had worked his way to a slight rise and in the distance he could see from a moving cloud of dust that the posse had overtaken his horse and was back-tracking.

"Ask me no questions," Buttons returned, "and I'll tell you no windies. How much for the horse, friend?"

The man grinned and shook his head. "She ain't for sale." He seemed to take pleasure in Buttons' predicament.

"Mister," Buttons urged desperately, "I'm in no position to dicker. Name your top price, and I'll double it. Hemp irritates the skin on my neck."

"No bueno," smirked the rider in his nasal voice. He saw that the posse was coming back and neck-reined to depart.

Buttons had no choice if he wished to live. He flipped out the six-barrelled weapon. It leveled rock-steady.

"Get down!" he commanded softly and dug into his pocket for a wad of bills. "I'm buying her, and I'd hate to stuff the money into a corpse's pocket. You'll be safe. I'll let them get close enough to make me out and lead them away while you hide."

Buttons was no killer. He was bluffing, although nothing in his manner showed it.

But the rider from Texas was misled by Buttons' dudish appearance. A short explosive curse ripped from his lips and he drew, mighty fast. Buttons triggered instantly, and the man's heavy sidearm went flying into space. He made a grab at it with his other hand as the weapon disappeared into the gorge.

The bark of the derringer had boogered the mare. She reared, her hind quarters slipping over the rimrock. The rider let out one hideous scream and toppled backwards into the awful space, his fingernails leaving long furrows in the hard leather of the cantle.

Too late, Buttons leaped to aid him. The tall dude was sick at what he had done accidently. He could only grab at the bridle and brace his shiny tan shoes on the rocks and pull with all the hard strength in his body. A seam in his loud coat creaked warningly over the rockhard muscles, and his arms seemed ready to tear from the sockets.

For a clock's tick, it was tough and go. Then the wall-eyed mare's thrashing hindquarters found a slight foothold, and together they made it to safety. The mare blew and trembled while Buttons looked down into the waters below. There was no sign of his accidential victim, only a spreading ripple that moved along with the slow current. The poor devil had probably hit the bottom and stayed there.

But there was no time for ceremony. The returning posse had heard the gunfire. Buttons heard their distanced-thinned yells of rage as he hastily examined the chestnut's legs and belly for injuries. She was all right except for minor abrasions. He mounted and lit out in a fast lope. The mare was as fresh as she looked. . . .

LATER when he had hopelessly outdistanced the tired mounts of the posse, his stomach reminded him that he had gone too long without food. He found a cool spring in a motte of scrub oaks and found some grub in the saddlebags. There was an extra gun, some shells, and a letter wrapped in oilskin.

After hobbling the chestnut and cooking up a bait, he sat against a tree on his huge fancy silk handkerchief and opened the letter. It was from a gent who signed himself "Kingfisher" and was addressed to a Merry Kildee at Bald Rock. Buttons knew of the town, some fifty miles north in the foothills. He had read of a gold strike there several months ago.

The letter went:

Old Friend: The bearer, Ten-Face Joe Bart, is the huckleberry for the

job you got. His handle might make you think he uses false faces, but we call him that on account he can play-act better than stage people.

He had been on several bank jobs with my boys, and I tell you, old friend, he is handy at lots of things, including a smoke-wagon. He savvies the set-up and will corral the job for five thousand like you offered—with a extra five thousand for me for furnishing him. You are getting out dirt cheap.

You get Hardrock Johnson's dude son out of the way, and I know damn well Ten-Face can convince the pinheads in Bald Rock that he is Johnson's whelp, William. Too bad your pardner, Hardrock, got killed in a cave-in, you old coyote.

Buttons studied the letter for a long time. His first intention had been to check and see if the man whom he had accidently dumped into the Lipan had any folks to report to. Buttons didn't feel quite so bad now, but he didn't like to see anybody go out that way.

Then an idea struck him, and his chain-lightning brain whirled into motion. Why not? Here was a cool five thousand just begging for him to take it. No sense in money like that going to waste. Besides, he justified weakly, he at least owed his victim the honor of carrying out his interrupted mission.

He took a short nap and cleaned up as best he could at the spring. Then he saddled the rested chestnut and struck out for Bald Rock. As his course led him away from the Lipan valley toward the distance-hazed foothills, the chestnut ate up the miles in a steady running walk. He rode all night, treating the mare easy, and sunup found him in a grove looking down on the dirty mining town of Bald Rock which clung precariously to the side of the next hill.

Even at this distance, he could feel the thudding of the stamp mill and could make out the deeper red of a long tailings dump against the faded hillside. Then the mare crow-hopped in fear, and warned him, too late.

"Scratch a cloud!" barked a rough voice, and Buttons found himself under the muzzles of two hungry-looking .45's held by a grim-eyed pair of toughs who both wore nickel stars on their unlaundered shirts.

This pair looked too hard and efficient for any monkey-business. Buttons dropped the reins and obediently reached, putting on his best look of injured surprise.

CHAPTER TWO

The Laughing Killer

"GENTLEMEN, please!" requested Buttons, assuming a tenderfoot look of fear, "Put up those firearms, they might discharge!"

One of the riders spurred out of the trees. "Ne'mind that," the lawman growled, "Who in the hell are you. We're mighty particular about strangers in these parts."

"I'm William Johnson," returned Buttons without hesitation, "My father, Hardrock Johnson, owns half-interest in a mine here."

"You mean *owned* a half-interest, don't you?" smirked the man. Both of his captors relaxed somewhat. "Wouldn't have a letter of introduction on you, would you, 'Mister Johnson'?", continued the speaker meaningly.

Buttons produced Kingfisher's letter and handed it over confidently. The man was too long on book learning since he screwed up his ugly face with effort, and his lips moved haltingly.

"That him, Rawhide?" asked the other rider who still had Buttons covered.

The tinstar called Rawhide finished the letter, folded it and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He spit a stream of cut plug and eyed Buttons quizzically.

"Yeah, you can sack your hardware, Pete," Rawhide ordered, "He's the huckleberry, but I'll be damned if I knowed even Easterners went that far with clothes. Looks like you're over-playin' the part, but I reckon you know what you're about. Glad to meet up with you, Bart. Come along, and Merry'll read the sign for you. Hot damn, wisht I could git five thousand skins dumped in my lap so easy!"

"It's ability that come so high," laughed Buttons, "Lead on, I need a side of beef and a bunk in the worst way."

They rode into the sun-blasted town and up the slope to what was evidently the mine office. It was a clapboard shack divided

into a front and rear office. The pair of tinstars herded Buttons into the only door and into the front office. In spite of the early hour, it was open for business.

TRUE to his nature, Buttons Evans' dark eyes were first attracted to a woman's face, a face of beauty but of brains and determination, framed in soft blonde curls. She was working over a set of books.

The cautious part of his brain mentally put a boot toe into the seat of his fancy pants, but he swept off his derby and bowed at the waist.

"What manner of men," he said with cheerful outrage, "Is there here who would allow one so pretty to do common work? Those hands were meant to wear jewels, not ink stains. Those dainty feet to tread in marble halls, not in this squalid—"

Her cold blue eyes cut him off. He would have had more success filling the Grand Canyon with sand, grain at a time. Here, he noted, was an interesting woman. She curled her red lips in faint disgust at the two lawmen. Then she studied Buttons' handsome face for long seconds, finally examining his striped clothes and golden buttons. She said nothing and went back to her bookkeeping.

Buttons felt as if he had been thoroughly examined as a naturalist would examine an insect, then cast it aside as worthless.

"All right, Johnson," growled Rawhide and gave him a push toward the inner door. "Business before pleasure. You dudes think yo're really the answer to every filly's prayer. You're wasting time on her. She's already got herself another Easterner, a yellow-bellied engineer who drinks hisself stiff every day because he's a dynamite-boogered."

Bull red of anger flooded the girl's oval face, but she looked back up at Buttons quickly. "Johnson?" she said with surprise, then slow understanding spread over her features.

"Yes," he smiled, "William Johnson. And you are—?"

"Oh hell," snarled Pete, "That's Miss high-and-mighty Jean McDonald, if it'll git a move on you."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Miss McDonald," insisted Buttons, "I trust that it will become more than just that."

She was still studying him narrowly. "William Johnson, the spitting image of his dead father!" she finally bit out, slowly and very sarcastically.

Buttons assumed a look of sadness at the mention of his "father" and started to say more, but Rawhide and Pete both shoved him toward the rear door again.

"For Gawd's sake!" snarled Rawhide, "Get the hell into Merry's office!"

Buttons winced. That girl's tongue put a razor to shame.

Merry Kildee sat behind a big desk, and Buttons saw why the handle "Merry". The man looked like a Santa Claus without a beard.

He was fat, but not too fat to hide great masses of solid muscle on his short frame. His faded blue eyes twinkled, and he appeared constantly on the verge of bursting into jolly laughter.

Kildee bounced out of his swivel chair like a rubber ball and circled the desk with hand extended. "Well, well!" he boomed from his barrel chest, "You must be William. My deepest sympathies, my boy, in your sorrow for old Hardrock. At least, he died painlessly. Cave-in, you know. Didn't know what hit him. Those things do happen. Never been able to get his poor remains out. Too dangerous. Reckon he's happy in the Gilded Girl, though. Really took pride in it."

He pumped Buttons' hand with a grip of steel and closed the door. Then he motioned the dude to a chair at the desk and reseated himself. The two lawmen, Rawhide and Pete, leaned idly against the window which looked out over the mine tunnel. The fat man's voice dropped.

"That girl had ears like a wild mustang. Going to get rid of her as soon as I can cook up a fool-proof plan to keep people hereabouts from asking too many questions."

BUTTONS felt a shock at the sudden change in the man's manner. Merry still looked like a cherubic old man, but he spoke of murdering a lovely girl as if speaking of shooting a lame horse. This Kildee gent, Buttons boy, was more dangerous than a pit of sidewinders and a gallon of cyanide!

"Here's Kingfisher's letter, Boss," said Rawhide.

Merry read it carefully and chuckled

aloud. "My bosom pal, Kingfisher! Calls me old friend in one breath and digs me for five thousand in the next, besides five thousand that I'll have to grease your palm with.

"Ten-Face Joe Bart, huh? But while you're here, you'll be William Johnson, come to claim his heritage in the Gilded Girl. Even in private, we'll all call you William Johnson to get into the habit."

Buttons smiled pleasantly and fished for a thin cheroot. Merry waited politely until the lean man lighted it. "What do I do?" asked Buttons. He was holding his breath. That was a dangerous question.

Merry looked at him narrowly. His voice was edged. "Didn't Kingfisher tell you?"

"Sure, sure," waved Buttons. "But I believe in building my fences tight. Thought you would go over the setup again. Less chance for any slipups."

The danger faded from Merry's eyes. He laughed, a peculiar deep hoarse bubbling in his chest. "You're all right, Johnson. Do to ride the river with. A man can't plan too carefully, I always say. And there ain't going to be any slipups. I don't work that way. Here's the deal.

"Like I say, Hardrock was killed in a cave-in. He left a will leaving his half of the Gilded Girl to his no-good son back East. Hardrock hadn't seen his whelp since he was a kid. Hardrock and his wife had been divorced for twenty or so years. She couldn't stand the west and its rough ways.

"Well, Hardrock knew from reports filtering back that his whelp wasn't no good, just a woman-chasing dandy. So the old coot put some snags in his will. His son could become a pardner with me in the mine if he would work in the Gilded Girl for three months, ten hours a day without no time off for Sundays. The wily old rascal even stipulated how much ore his kid had to blast out and load every day.

"He figured if William Johnson could stand up to the task, he would have all the likker and laziness worked out of his system and be on the road to making a man.

"But if the son failed or skipped just one day, he was out in the cold. And that nosey filly in there, Jean McDonald, would get the half-ownership. Hardrock was soft on her, and I believe if the old man'd been forty years better off, he'd of run that dude mining engineer a close race for her hand. As it is, his will fixes it so I can't fire her and left her an income for life out of his money.

"Watch out for her. She's a female detective. She suspects me, but can't prove a thing. I'll fix her permanently when I've had a quiet spell to think it over."

Buttons blew a thin stream of smoke at the ceiling and listened.

"Now," continued the fat man, "Hardrock has plenty of friends in the Gilded Girl. Old miners who have been with him for a long spell. They're going to watch you like a hawk. There ain't no way of getting out of the work. You'll have to put on a real act."

Buttons looked at his soft hands and smiled. "I'll have five thousand dollars worth of calluses before ninety days go by, but lead me to it. I'll get some suitable clothes and start tomorrow."

Merry chuckled and banged on his desk. "Now, that's the spirit! Show him to the hotel, boys. Be at the tunnel at six in the morning, Johnson."

Buttons went out with Pete who closed the door behind him. Rawhide, at a signal, had lingered inside where Merry was staring at the closed door from which Buttons had left.

"Rawhide," said the fat man and paused to laugh again, "That gent is slick. Maybe, he *was* just reviewing the setup. And maybe, he just set in here and cleverly got the whole story which he didn't know before. Which way, I don't know. I'm nobody's fool, and there is something about that hombre that don't quite fit the crack."

"Huh?" blurted Rawhide. His dull mind had missed any suspected leading questions by Buttons, "Something haywire?"

"Rawhide, watch him. Stick to him like a bur. He may be okay. Maybe not. If he ain't, he's settin' a bronc he can't stay with!"

THREE days later, everybody in town town knew that 'William Johnson' had arrived and was trying to fulfill the terms of old Hardrock's will. Buttons had put at the only hotel under the assumed name. His new miner's outfit which he donned each morning before daybreak was already well worn and sweat stained.

Buttons' hands had blistered, bursted, reblistered and rebursted in an agonizing

cycle from swinging a jack hammer and holding on to the wrong end of a shovel. His back ached and his ears rang for hours after he came out of the mine, from the blasts of powder in the confines of the Gilded Girl.

It was after dark when he finished a huge meal in the hotel's dining room and arose to see the night life. He was freshly bathed, trimmed, and except for his hardening hands, he scarcely looked the part of a miner in his elegant attire which he had had brushed and ironed.

Like most mining towns, Bald Rock removed its lid at night and revealed a boiling devil's caldron of sin and wickedness. Smoking kerosene torches served as street lights and lit up the dirt street with a flickering Satan's glow. Already dozens of pleasure-bent hardrockers were wending an unsteady course from bar to bar, cursing, laughing and singing in drunken tones.

Through the bedlam, the slick dude moved like a trim sloop among wallowing scows. He entered one bar and put two shots of liquid fire on top of his steak. Playing the part of an Eastern dude, he left hurriedly but gracefully when a sudden, senseless brawl broke out.

He noticed that the hireling tinstar, Rawhide, ignored the disturbance and casually followed him out. Buttons frowned absently and smoothed his spike moustache. That Rawhide gent had been following him too closely for three days for it to be a series of coincidences.

Then he forgot the Kildee bloodhound. Up ahead was Jean McDonald. The pretty girl was on the boardwalk in front of a saloon. She had a drunken young man by the arm and was vainly trying to keep him from entering the batwing doors. Buttons quickened his long stride.

Carefully, he doffed his derby. "May I be of help?" he asked softly.

She looked around with a pleading expression, but her face grew hard when she saw Buttons. "No thank you!" she snapped and resumed her tugging. "Please Lacy, don't go in there. You've had too much already. This is getting you no place!"

"Lemme 'lone," muttered the young drunk thickly. He was good-looking in a clean rugged way and wore whipcord shirt and breeches which were laced up in high engineers boots. "I'm no good f'you."

Jean's hold was slipping and tears started from her eyes.

Buttons stepped around her quickly with an apologetic, "Pardon me." His blocked fist cut a short arc. There was a dull meaty sound, and the drunken man collapsed. Buttons eased him to the walk.

Jean turned on the adventurer like a puma. Buttons dodged and picked up the unconscious man as if he were a baby. He was grinning like a devil as he used Lacy's limp body as a shield against her constant charges.

"Now," he asked sympathetically, "where were you trying to take him?"

The girl's fury gave way to a woman's weakness. The tears flowed freely. "T-to his room," she sobbed. "He stays at the hotel, too. Oh, Lacy, why must you be like this!"

Rawhide came hurrying up. "What's going on here?" he blustered.

Buttons shoved around him with his burden. "Just taking a sick friend home," he replied. "Nothing is going on."

"Now, see here, I'm the law, and you can't be bustin' harmless drunks in the whiskers around here!"

Buttons paused long enough to look the ugly man squarely in the eyes. The dude's voice was dangerous. "If you're so interested in keeping order on Bald Rock, suppose, my friend, that you step back into the bar which we just left. Seems I recall a lot of whisker-busting going on in there."

Rawhide was stunned by the flash of chill, tempered steel that flashed for an instant under the velvet exterior of Buttons Evans. He just stood there with his jaw slack while the burdened dandy followed the slim form of Jean into the hotel lobby. Then the puppet lawman scurried away to report this new development to Merry Kildee.

AS BUTTONS entered the unconscious man's room and laid Lacy on the bed, a sense of alarm seeped through the rosy glow of gallantry around him. There would be trouble with Kildee over this. Buttons shrugged resignedly. Didn't he always jump into the fire over a pretty face? He would never learn.

Jean poured some water from the crock pitcher while Buttons unlaced and removed the heavy boots. Lacy was beginning to

show signs of his heavy drinking in his young face.

"Is this the 'dynamite-boogered' boy-friend of yours," he asked somewhat enviously, "that Rawhide mentioned that first day in the mine office?"

The girl tenderly bathed the still face and pushed back Lacy's damp hair. Buttons wished that he could have been knocked out and have her care for him.

"Yes," she said finally, "he worked at the Gilded Girl. He went to school in the East and in spite of his age, there wasn't a better mining engineer in the country until—"

"Until a blast of giant went off in his face?" guessed Buttons shrewdly.

"Yes. Two days after that cave-in got poor old Hardrock, Lacy here was in the mine planning a way to recover his body. Somehow, a charge went off. A charge that had no business being planted in a worked out stope. The very force of the blast saved Lacy's life. It blew him clear of a fresh cave-in caused by the blast which buried Hardrock's body still deeper.

"Lacy was unconscious for a week, and we didn't think he would make it. All the time he screamed and raved, and we had to hold him in bed. He was living the terrible experience over and over. It was horrible. It did something to his nerves and mind. Even after he recovered from the physical hurt, he couldn't sleep at night for the nightmares. Ever since then, he drinks until he passes out each night."

"I've seen men go to pieces like that," nodded Buttons, "Bronc busters who got the worst end with a man-killer—men who witness sudden unexpected Colt-death right under their noses. He should be made to go back," advised the dude, "held in the mine by force with dynamite going off all around him—at a safe distance, of course."

Jean held her head in both hands. Her hair was lovely in the kerosene light. "He won't," she choked in a hopeless voice. "Some of my miner friends tried it. Only halfway up the hill, Lacy foamed at the mouth like a madman and tore loose from those big men like they were babies. Then he fainted in fear.

"We already had our wedding date set before it happened." She suddenly seemed to remember who he was, the part he was playing. "It's that giggling fiend of a Merry's blame! And you're helping him with his scheme! You're not William Johnson. You're a dirty, blood-sucking beast! I know that Hardrock's boy will never show up. He would have been here long since. He is dead, I know, murdered. Maybe, by your own hand.

"I can't prove it just yet, but Hardrock was murdered, too. But I will. And Hardrock's boy was five years older than you. Or than you look. I never saw him, but Hardrock and I used to talk a whole lot. William Johnson was a spineless weakling, which I am forced to say, you are not, in spite of all your dandy manners and fine clothes!

"You helped me tonight although I didn't want it. So I'll return the favor. A day of reckoning is coming. And soon. I don't know how much your take is in this dirty murder game, but take my advice, Mister whatever your name is, and hit the trail, right now. In the morning might be too late!"

She was up on her feet now, blazing out at him with all the fighting spunk in her shapely body. Man, she was pretty when she was mad. Buttons had an overpowering desire to kiss her, but he didn't want his moustache slapped down his throat.

IN THIS glow of admiration, his unguarded mouth opened and he started saying things that he meant, but didn't want to speak aloud. Buttons was a man doomed to walk through life, constantly being tripped by lovely faces. But he liked it, when the chips were down.

"Get out of town!" he answered, "Buttons Evans tucking his tail to a fat laughing badman? With a fair damsel in distress? Lady, lady, may sheep cease to smell before I would desert you. Command, and I will charge barehanded right down Merry Kildee's gullet after he had eaten a bucket of garlic!"

"I—I almost believe you," stammered the girl. Then she smiled like the first burst of sunrise over the purple hills, "Yes, I do believe you!"

"Thank you; a wise decision is yours," bubbled Buttons. He had really jumped the track, now. Her smile did that. "And we will do something for Lacy there."

"I hope so," she said fervently, "I really hope so!"

"We'll see," rejoined Buttons and doffed his derby with a graceful bow. "And now, goodnight, tomorrow will be a new day with new hopes."

She extended a soft hand, which Buttons kissed with masculine tenderness. She had only meant to shake hands, but Buttons, the sly-devil, never overlooked such a chance.

"Goodnight, Mr. Evans," she said softly, "I will stay with Lacy until I'm sure that he is alright."

Buttons went out and walked down the hall toward his room. A gay tune was on his thin lips, but it died quickly. Rawhide and Pete were coming down the dim passageway at a quick pace. The ominous pair ranged to each side of him and slightly behind.

"Come along, Mr. *Johnson,*" growled Rawhide and eased his Colt half out of the cut-away holster, "Merry hankers to palaver with you."

"About my aiding a lady in distress?" asked Buttons lightly.

Rawhide snorted. "That's a drop in the bucket," he rumbled harshly. "Seems another 'William Johnson' just blew into town!"

CHAPTER THREE

High Stake Poker

THE sky was overcast and it was as black as pitch. There was a lamp shining out of Merry's mine office, and they hazed Buttons in to face the jolly man. Buttons wasn't puzzled long about the other 'William Johnson'. Even as they went through the dark front office, Buttons caught the irritating nasal twangs of the man's voice.

Joe Bart had miraculously survived his three hundred foot tumble into the Lipan. One of his arms was in a crude sling, and a livid bruise covered one side of his dark face where the water had smacked him with terrific force.

Merry smiled widely as Ten-Face Joe Bart cursed loudly and pointed with his good arm. "That's the dirty son!" he twanged excitedly. "Thought you'd finished me off, eh? I'll make you think Apache torture is ring-around-the rosy!"

"Who," inquired Buttons innocently, "is this"

Merry roared and pounded on his desk. "By answering some very personal question about my old sidekick, Kingfisher," he smirked, "he has convinced me that he is the real man that Kingfisher sent to rep for William Johnson. You're a fake, an impersonator impersonating an impersonator. Gawd, this is funny!" Then he stopped laughing with an effort. "You're a dead man, of course," he announced to Buttons, "unless you hanker to try at the question bee I just gave Ten-Face here?"

"What have I to lose?" smiled Buttons.

"How old is Kingfisher?" barked Merry. "What's his real handle? Where was he born? Is he married? How many sixes does he tote? Did he ever—"

Buttons raised a hand. "That's enough. Where do we go from here?"

Ten-Face Joe tried to snarl, but his bruised face stopped him. "You ain't got no call to worry where we go from here," he twanged, "I'm finishing you right now for pushing me into the Lipan!"

Then Ten-Face reached over and got Pete's Colt from that gent's hand. Merry chuckled and shook his head. "Don't be messing up my office, Bart!" he commanded. "This long slicker had been accepted by the citizens as the real William Johnson. I got away with that 'cave-in accident', but we ain't going off half-cocked this time. Have to mull it over."

Buttons waited silently under two guns muzzles while the fat man pondered his fate.

"Got it!" continued Merry, "You're the real Johnson whelp, Ten-Face, and this fancy pants here got wind of Rockhard's death and waylaid you to cash in on the mine. You made it here to warn me, see, but you can't beef him personal because the real Johnson boy was a jelly-spined weakling. Wouldn't be in character.

"Take him down the hill, Rawhide. When you get close to town, let him have it where his suspenders cross and be damn sure it's for keeps. When the good citizens boil out, tell them what I said. Say you had arrested him and was taking him to the lock-up when he made a break for it. Tried to coyote on you, so all you could do was plug him."

"Got you, Merry," lipped the crooked lawman and prodded Buttons in preparation to search him for weapons.

A fine film of moisture shone on Buttons' forehead. "Just a moment, gentlemen," he objected softly. "Maybe I can convince you that there is no need of taking the risk of another murder. I have no axe to grind in this matter. By luck, pure and simple, I—er—borrowed this gentleman's mount when I was closely pressed by a group of misunderstanding people." He went on smoothly and sincerely, to explain the whys and hows. He was persuasive as only Buttons Evans could be. "The safest way out of this—including myself, of course," he added meaningly, "is for myself to quietly leave town when every one is in bed asleep. Then you can say I was an impostor, but escaped."

Merry looked very thoughtful.

"Furthermore, Mr. Bart here," purred Buttons, "knows that I had no intentions of dumping him into the river. And if he had not been so fortunate as to survive, I can assure you that I would have carried out your plan to own the mine entirely, at the same price."

MERRY chuckled with relish. "A fast talker!" he offered, "and a sensible one. Never mind the hardware, Rawhide. Our guest can leave when the notion hits him. But it might be right smart of you to wait until two or three in the morning before easing to the hotel and picking up your gear."

"Thank you, gentlemen," bowed Buttons, "for allowing me to continue enjoying the wonders of life. However, I have a long wait until the early hours of morning. Shall we while away the hours with a few friendly hands of stud?"

Merry laughed. "You got your share of guts," he favored. "Too bad I ain't got a bunk for you in my setup here, Mr.—?"

"Evans, Buttons Evans, at your beck and call."

"Well, have a chair, Evans," laughed Merry. "And I'll call you over a few hands of poker. We'll help you pass the rest of your short stay in Bald Rock. Can't have you doubting our hospitality.

"You know, Evans, if you wasn't a fugitive from the law, you would be on your way down the hill with Rawhide, now, fast talk or no. But it ain't good business to murder just to cover your trail. Always kill with a purpose. Remember that, my boy, and you'll always get ahead faster."

A very fatherly piece of advice, thought Buttons wryly.

"Thank you," he returned. "Cut for deal?"

While talking, Merry had cleared off his desk and the five men had drawn up chairs. "Rawhide," ordered the fat man, "hie down and fetch up a couple of quarts of whiskey. It'll help the time pass, and let Evans leave us with a warm spot in his heart. Tell Rusty at the hotel bar that it's for me. He come up with some twenty year old velvet from under the bar."

Ten-Face won the deal, but he passed with his broken arm. Pete shuffled while Buttons stacked his "General Custer" money in a neat pile before him.

"This'll be mighty interesting," gurgled Kildee as he eyed the money. He produced a huge roll and looked at his hole card. "Now, I warn you, Evans, we'll treat you right and feed you likker, but we'll sure try to take your dinero. Open for twenty."

They were betting on the fall of each card.

"Take it easy, boss!" whined Pete, "Evans said a friendly game."

Merry only laughed and looked at Buttons. "Poker is my one weakness," he said. "Love a good game of poker."

Buttons was in his element. "Call," he replied quietly.

Lady Luck was fickle at first. She favored one, then another. But Merry's hireling tinstar, Pete, was out of the game in ten minutes. It was three-handed for another twenty, then they heard the clump of Rawhide's returning boots. He was in a hurry.

Instead of entering, he stuck his head in from the front office and called, "Come in here a shake, Merry!"

The fat man heaved up and went out, closing the door. Buttons could hear the muted murmur of their voices, Rawhide's urgent, angry tones, and Merry's chuckling ones. Then Merry laughed real loud.

Buttons looked at Ten-Face and smiled pleasantly, but that gent only snarled back. The door opened and Merry and Rawhide came in. Rawhide looked at Buttons, and the dude didn't like the tinstar's expression. Merry's incessant mirth grated on Buttons' nerves.

"Open a bottle, Rawhide!" boomed

Merry and resumed his seat. They passed the liquor around. "Whose deal?"

Rawhide sat down next to Buttons so that his gun was on the far side. Buttons noted how carefully the cruel-faced tinstar picked the seat. The game started again with Rawhide sitting in, and there was an electric tension, a feeling of sudden violent death in the room in spite of all Merry's glee.

THE hours passed quickly in the sweating excitement of the game. Rawhide had long since gone broke and had retired to the shadows behind Buttons. Buttons could feel his mean little eyes on one Mr. Evans' back. Ten-Face Joe was broke, too, and drunk. He had his head on the desk.

Only the fat killer and the handsome dude faced each other across the desk. The lamplight glistened on the sweat on Kildee's smiling face. He seemed to have a madness for poker, an insane riot of pleasure crossed his face as he pulled in a pot. His collar was twisted and his thick lips were parted slightly, his breath coming in low gasps. His blue eyes glistened like ice.

Lady Luck had gradually swung to Buttons. Or at least what appeared to be luck. Actually, it was the skillful manipulation of Buttons' flying fingers. Three times Merry had spun his swivel chair to the safe behind him.

Then Buttons Evans, the tumble-weed soldier of fortune, had over seventy-five thousand dollars stacked before him. If it excited him, he showed no sign in his handsome face.

Merry laughed deeply and spun to the safe once more.

Rawhide stirred irritably in the dark shadows. "Aw, hell, boss!" he cursed savagely and impatiently, "Ain't this gone—"

"Shut up!" ordered Kildee and threw a paper on the desk, "There's the deed to my half of the Gilded Girl. It's worth plenty more, but I'll play one hand. The deed against your stack!"

Buttons nodded. It was his deal. He shuffled expertly, and Merry cut with a hand that shook visibly. The pasteboards flicked out with snake-strike speed in the flickering lamp light. Merry looked hesitantly at his hand.

"I'll be damn!" he chuckled hoarsely. "Nothing but ace-high."

"Two deuces," returned Buttons and dragged the pot like it was four-bits worth, "Tough luck, Kildee. The fortune of the game, you know. Well, gentlemen, suppose we reverse our plans? I will remain, and you can leave Bald Rock. I couldn't leave now with my vast mining interests here."

The words were empty, hollow mockery, and he knew it. He plainly heard Rawhide and Pete ease back the hammers on their guns. He sat very still. A sudden move might end his life right there.

Kildee looked disappointed now that the game was done. He appeared tired and washed-out like a man who had overindulged in some dissipation.

"Damn!" he swore, "I really enjoyed that game. Too bad it had to end. Been a long time since I played for such stakes. Course, there was a certain gold-buttoned dude slicker across from me who was double dealing to beat the very hell, so fast I couldn't catch it. Even tried to insult me with that last hand by topping an ace-high with a flea-bitten pair of deuces."

Then Merry's face grew hard. "When Rawhide went for the firewater, a swamper in your hotel stopped him, trying to pick up a little likker money. Seems this swamper was in the hotel hall tonight when you run off at the mouth to that McDonald filly.

"I was having too much fun right then to stop the game. But it's over now, and you're on your way down the hill with Rawhide as first mentioned tonight. You won the Gilded Girl, but we're taking her back. Dead men don't need gold."

Buttons opened his mouth, but Merry slapped him with sudden fury. Rawhide jabbed his Colt cruelly into the base of Buttons' skull.

Then the glass burst in both windows, and the door slammed back with a crash.

"Everybody reach!" boomed a voice. Buttons recognized it as that of one of the miners that had been pointed out to him as dangerous by Merry, since the miner had been a staunch friend of the dead Hardrock Johnson.

Everybody froze under the threat of many carbine and pistol barrels jutting into the windows and door. Jean McDonald came in, her lovely face white with hatred. She walked stiffly up to Merry. A pack

of muttering miners backed her up with bristling guns.

"We've got Hardrock's body," she announced coldly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dynamite Showdown

FOR once the fat man didn't laugh. He just stared.

Carefully, Buttons stepped away from Rawhide's drooping gun. He gripped his derringer, but didn't try to draw it.

"These men," continued Jean with a wave of her hand, "have been risking their lives secretly every night, clearing the cave-in in that abandoned stope where Hardrock died. They finally reached him tonight. His body is full of .45 slugs, Merry Kildee, and you'll hang for it!"

Merry regained his composure. He was laughing again. "You're not accusing me!" he gurgled. "Try and prove it."

Buttons was quietly gathering up a few odd-thousand dollars from the desk and easing them into his coat since all eyes were on Merry. To get ahead in this old hard world, one had to take advantage of all opportunities.

"We're far past that stage, I reckon," rumbled a giant miner. "We got ways to get the truth out of you and your skunk gunnies."

The miner's speech was so laden with deadly threat, that the crooks drew sharp, loud breaths almost together. Ten-Face seemed to sober immediately and went dirty-sheet white. He had never replaced the Colt that he had lost in the Lipan, and his courage seemed to rest with the sunken gun.

"Count me out!" he squalled, "I just got to town and I didn't have nothing to do with it. I'll turn state's evidence and tell what I know on Kildee!"

"Shut your mouth, you yellow rat!" bellowed Merry and licked his smiling lips nervously. "Now, Miss Jean, ain't there some way we can sensibly talk this thing out?"

"The miners will take care of you," the girl replied coldly, "I have no pity for you. I could hang you myself for what you did to Lacy when you tried to get him out of the way."

Merry looked troubled and raised a peace-making arm toward her. "Now, now, let's don't—" he began and then lunged with a speed that was amazing for his huge bulk. One powerful arm whipped out a pistol from his hip while the other encircled the girl in a death-grip.

"Now, you scuts!" he roared, "I'll give the orders around here! Open up a lane, there, unless you want Miss Busybody here shot to dollrags. Come on, boys, the ship is sinking fast! One sudden move, and the girl beats me to hell by a clock's tick. And I reckon the boys and me might carry a few of you along with us before we cash our chips!"

Jean pleaded with the miners to come on and take the killers. But there was nothing that they or Buttons Evans could do. Merry had his hideout gun on full cock with the trigger pulled. Only his thick thumb kept the pronged hammer from falling and sending a slug into Jean's brain. Even if the fat man were killed instantly by a shot, his thumb would relax, and the lovely girl would die.

Reluctantly, the armed miners opened a lane, and the killer crew slunk through like surly wolves on tense guard. Ten-Face had a hard decision. To stay meant the hangrope; to go, after running off at the mouth like he had, meant a bullet from Merry, maybe. He cast his quivering lot with Merry and crowded close on Rawhide's spike heels.

Buttons was facing a hard decision, too. He debated whether to go and later fight it out with Merry to save Jean, or to wait and help the miners get her free. While he hesitated, the lane closed before him.

Merry got outside, and Buttons could hear his warning: "Don't foller us!"

One of the miners seemed to see for the first time that Buttons had lingered behind. "Look, boys, we got one of the rats!" he snarled, "The imitation William Johnson. Get 'im!"

But Mrs. Evans' boy was at that instant in the act of kicking over the lamp and diving right over the heads of the guards at the window. A shotgun went off under him, and he felt the heat of its tongue of flame through his clothes. He hit the ground in a dead run, thanking the powers that be for the inky blackness of the overcast night.

"Don't shoot at 'im!" raged a voice, "Merry's liable to think we taking pots at him, and kill Miss Jean. Run 'im down!"

Some of the miners tried to catch him, but he was too long legged for the slow hardrockers. Once safe in the darkness, he ducked behind a boulder and strained his eyes up the slope toward the mine tunnel. Most of the miners were going up that way.

Every sensible instinct in his body urged him to get Bart's chestnut mare from the livery and shake the dust of Bald Rock off his polished shoes. The time would never be riper, he argued, and fingered the crumpled banknotes in his pocket. There were many places better than this for Buttons Evans with brighter lights and smoother liquor—not to mention more friendly citizens.

THE mental struggle was lost before it began. Jean's troubled face floated, pale and lovely, before his mind's eye, and he kicked whatever common sense he had into a corner.

Buttons admitted that women were poison for him, but did he enjoy poisoning himself! Besides, he had never met the woman that he couldn't kiss, and he meant to kiss that filly if he had to do it while standing on a nail keg with the rope on his neck!

"They took her in the mine!" an excited voice drifted down.

"Git back, yuh fool!" warned another.

Buttons heard them milling around up there in hopeless confusion. He cursed himself for not making a quicker decision and going along with Merry. At least, he would have had a chance to help her. But that was too late to cry over, now. There must be some way. . . .

Then a lurid blue-red tongue of flame belched out from the Gilded Girl. Buttons felt the awful push of the concussion and was deafened by the frightful bellow of blasting powder. Rocks peppered the ground angrily around him.

There was a few seconds of stunned silence that hurt after the blast. Then the miners' voice muttered into the black night, became a babbling rush of words.

"The damn fools had blowed the tunnel in behind them!" screamed a man hoarsely. "It'll take weeks to clear it!"

At first, Buttons experienced horror at the impact of the words, then his nimble brain tapped him on the shoulder. Merry and his crew weren't the type to deliberately condemn themselves to a slow death. There was an answer somewhere.

Then he thought he had the answer. He rose up, but stopped and gave out with some fancy but heated cussing. He couldn't try to walk up there and calmly tell that maddened pack of men his idea. They would shoot him down like a mad dog.

He laughed suddenly and spun to run like a deer down the hill into Bald Rock. He circled behind his hotel and slipped into the hall from the back way.

In a few seconds, he was panting and pouring water on the sleeping engineer's face and slapping him over and over. It had been several hours since Buttons had knocked Lacy out and put him to bed. The young man sat up and wiped at his face. He stared at Buttons dully.

Buttons talked fast and hard. Gradually, the import of his words sank into the hangover dulled brain. Lacy jumped into his boots without lacing them.

"Yes," he croaked, "There is another way out of the Gilded Girl. A natural opening that a man has to crawl through. It was the way that the lode was originally discovered. That part of the mine had long since been worked out and boarded up to keep out thieves. It's on the other side of the mountain, and the quickest way is on foot.

"That old shaft is closed at the bottom with three inch oak and runs nearly straight up. We might beat them. We've got to beat them! It's my fault that they have Jean."

"Forget that!" urged Buttons. "If we beat them, then what! They'll still have Jean for a shield, and Merry is smart enough to count on somebody to remember that natural shaft."

Lacy turned white. "If they even so much as bruise her, I'll tear out Kildee's heart with my bare hands!" He stopped and looked at Buttons with great beads of sweat on his face, terror in his eyes. "But what if Kildee brings some of that giant powder out of the mine with him? There was plenty of it stored inside the mine."

"We'll shove it right down his throat," returned Buttons. "But forget that powder-

fear of yours. Merry has no reason to be slowing himself down by carrying powder. First, we've got to make him turn loose of Jean. Maybe, he could be scared loose from her. . ."

"Scared loose," muttered the young engineer as they pushed down the dim hallway and into the black night. "Yes, scared loose! That's it! There's one way to do that. Come on!"

Buttons could feel the wash of cold terror that Lacy was fighting as they went rapidly up toward the Gilded Girl and the milling miners who were already working at the blocked tunnel. Nearly there, Buttons stopped.

"I'll wait here," he murmured, "Have a phobia for crowds. Peculiar, but—"

Lacy seemed not to hear. He headed for the mine office, and Buttons waited impatiently. In short moments, the engineer was back, his breath coming in short gasps.

"Up—up this way," Lacy managed. He was carrying a dim bundle as if it were a basket of rattlers.

The pair climbed desperately, their lungs working like bellows, and the sharp rocks cutting into their groping hands. Finally, they pulled themselves over the hogback and started down on will power alone. In a few minutes, the engineer stopped.

The clouds overhead had been thinning under the chill night wind. Now, as if to aid them, the struggling moon shot a pale shaft of light through a break, dimly outlining a jagged black hole in the mountainside.

"That's it!" gasped Lacy and dropped to his knees to work at the bundle. He was shaking violently, and sounded as if he were sobbing, not with grief, but with pure quivering terror.

Buttons leaned down with his six-barreled derringer ready and looked at the bundle. Then he understood. The thin moonlight revealed what Jimmy had gone up to the Gilded Girl for, five sticks of dynamite, bundled together. Expertly, but with shaky hands, Lacy reamed a small hole in the end of one stick, and inserted the shiny copper cap with its dangling white fuse. Carefully, the engineer judged the length of the fuse with long experience and cut off another half inch.

Buttons reckoned he had a very faint idea of the hell that the boy was going through to carry powder after his accident. Then a dull rumble beneath his feet broke into his thoughts.

"They just blew the boarding out of the shaft," muttered Lacy, "They'll be up in a few minutes."

THE waiting seemed an eternity. Finally, the sounds of cursing, panting men issued from the jagged hole. The first man to struggle up was Rawhide. He looked in all directions carefully as Buttons and Lacy ducked from sight. Then Rawhide clambered out and reached down to pull Jean roughly up. A puffing Merry Kildee wormed out and stood erect.

"Made it," he chuckled jubilantly, "Them dumb miners—"

Lacy squatted in the shelter of an outcrop and fired the fuse. A mean little tongue of flame licked out and crawled toward the gelatine. The smoke bit at Buttons' thin nostrils.

The tall dude was cut to the core as the match revealed the stark unreasoning fear in Lacy's young face as the engineer's love for Jean struggled with his fear of explosives.

Then Lacy stepped calmly into the open and carefully tossed the sputtering bundle of sudden death within inches of Merry's boot toes.

"You'll burn in hell this night, Kildee," Lacy called.

For one dawning instant, Merry and Rawhide blinked stupidly at the bundle like stunned children. Then they were both fighting like tigers to be the first back into the natural shaft, pushing the half-emerged Pete down as he squalled his protests. Like frightened prairie dogs, they vanished, leaving Jean looking up at the engineer and crying for joy.

She was free, but what was more important, she had seen with her own eyes, the reformation of her engineer. "Lacy! Lacy!"

Buttons knew now that Lacy had carefully cut the fuse to last until he could get to the explosive. He had counted on Merry feeling the same unreasoning terror that he had experienced. Lacy leaped from his perch to reach the sputtering bomb.

It may have been his weakened condition, or the strain, or an unseen outcrop, anyway Lacy tripped heavily and ended up

in a limp heap, not moving. Jean lost her head and ran for Lacy, instead of the dynamite.

Buttons said a prayer for his safe arrival and arched out into the twenty feet of space below. He lit and although he went limp and rolled with the shock, the jar ran up and numbed his brain. His head snapped forward into the rock, and the night grew very black.

But he could still see that crawling little flame on the fuse. He reached out and shoved. The death-dealing bundle dropped out of sight into the hole.

"Down!" he called, "Down flat!"

Whoom! The ground rocked and heaved. When it subsided, there was no hole left in the rocks, only a rubble.

Jimmy was sitting up. Nervous laughter welled from his throat. "I'm not afraid anymore!" he yelled. Jean kissed him. "You all right, honey?" he asked more sanely.

Buttons felt a twinge of envy. Oh, well, they planned to get married, and Buttons drew a very definite line there. Pretty girls were acceptable until they took that step.

Then a faint terror-stricken voice drifted up out of the rubble. It was Merry, and he wasn't laughing.

"For Gawd's sake," he wailed, "Get up out. I'd rather hang than die in here!"

Buttons looked at Lacy, his dark eyebrows going up.

"That hole curved sharp, right under here," the engineer explained, "It must have broken the force of the blast. Merry and his boys are alive to stretch an honest noose. Say, if it hadn't been for you, we three would be bloody shreds, and Kildee would have gone free!"

JEAN arose and came to Buttons who was on his feet and carefully dusting his somewhat soiled finery.

"Yes, Mr. Buttons Evans," she said. "You saved Lacy and me for a long life of happiness. And you helped rid him of his dynamite fear. We owe you a lot, Mister Buttons Evans, but now I can only offer this!"

At last Buttons got to kiss her. Right on those red lips.

Finally, he stepped back, leaving her gasping. Lacy had just began to stir a little uncomfortably.

"That," opined Buttons with relish, "was payment in full!"

"The miners must have heard that blast," remarked Lacy, "It'll bring them to their senses and over the ridge to dig out our rats."

At the mention of the burly crew of hardrockers, Buttons cleared his throat nervously. They might work him over considerably before Jean and Lacy could convince them of Buttons' friendship. Anyway, the only pretty female in Bald Rock was spoken for. Mr. Evans would seek greener pastures.

"I'm not used to such excitement," he said, "You two stay here and show the boys where to dig. I'm tired. I think I'll go to the hotel and lie down awhile. Goodnight."

At the top of the hogback, he paused and looked back at the happy pair. He absently twisted his spiked moustache and sighed. Maybe, he should try this marrying business—in about eighty years.

He moved down the other side, but stopping on the ridge against the sky was a tenderfoot's mistake. He could hear the miners coming up the slope, and he circled to avoid them.

False dawn was showing in the east when Buttons slipped quietly into his hotel room and packed quickly. The sleeping hostler at the livery did not hear him leave on Ten-Face's chestnut. Buttons reckoned that Ten-Face wouldn't need the mare anymore, and he would treat her kindly.

Miles out of Bald Rock, he paused on the trail to carefully count the gold buttons. They were all present.

Then for the first time he noticed the ruin of his fine coat. Back there on the mountain, the giant miner in falling had completely ripped away the left pocket of the striped coat. And in that pocket had been the money that Buttons had plucked from Merry's desk after the poker game. Even his "General Custer" cash was gone.

Buttons Evans was flat broke.

Oh, well, he still had his golden buttons and his health. And Jean McDonald's kiss couldn't be measured for value in terms of money. And besides, the whole world lay before him, and it was just teeming with suckers waiting for Buttons Evans to rope them in. . . .

THE END

MIRROR OF A MAN

By
ARCHIE JOSCELYN

"I should have killed you long ago," McAfee growled.

Flint McAfee, tinhorn killer, rodded things as he pleased in his purgatory paradise—until a broken derelict returned from the dead to settle a past-due account in honest blood!

THE SIGN above the door, faded and tattered now, said Smith's Restaurant. It was not a particularly inviting or appetizing place, but it was patronized by everyone, for the simple reason that it was the only place in town where a man could get a meal. That had been one of Flint McAfee's ideas, and when McAfee got a notion, most men accepted it.

Smith himself was called Mort by one or two friends. But more often, the names by which he was called were uncomplimentary, to say the least. Usually he was called Smith, without elaboration. That was not his name, as he had once explained, but it was sufficiently common so that it didn't matter much, to him or anyone else. Which was true, for what he was called made little difference to him, these days.

All that mattered was to get enough whiskey to keep in a drunken state of forgetfulness.

He hardly resembled, these days, the man who had come to Curlew Creek, only a few short years before, in the inception of the town—arriving, by chance or harsh coincidence, three days after Flint McAfee had staked his claim—to the town.

Smith had been alert then, vigorous, smoothly shaven, and with dreams in his head as well as practical plans. He had given another name, but it had been used only for a week or so, and everyone had long since forgotten what it was—including Flint McAfee, whose memory was good.

Feeding men had seemed a better paying proposition than grubbing for gold in the earth. So Smith had started his restaurant. He could cook—even his worst enemies conceded that. And, running across the length of the room behind the counter, he had installed a mirror which was the height of a man. A mirror which, strangely, was still unscarred by bullet holes.

There had been other shining things about Smith in those days. But now his clothes were dirty and old, his face was covered by an uncombed mat of hair and beard, the glossy black of which was sprinkled with gray. A Chinaman who padded in silent slippers did the cooking now. And the dreams of the ostensible proprietor, like his former name, had long since been forgotten, even by himself—knocked out by the iron fists of Flint McAfee.

Men who had forgotten other things concerning him, who despised and rather pitied him in general, still talked admiringly of the fight which Smith had put up when he first came to town. That fight had followed a killing on the street, and Smith's bold lettering with chalk, across the width of the big mirror, of the stark facts—followed by a blunt charge that Flint McAfee was responsible, since he was the gun-boss of Curley Creek, a man who ruled the community by fear. He was, the mirror had proclaimed, a killer and a disgrace to the town, and he ought to be run out—or strung up.

Smith had the gift of words. In a few chalked sentences he had said more clearly than anyone else had dared even think, what everyone knew. Customers had read the mirror and stared fearfully and edged to the background, waiting for the arrival of Flint McAfee.

McAfee had come—and had read the challenge with narrowing eyes. To everyone's surprise, he had not shot the big mirror to pieces. Nor pulled a gun on Smith. He had invited the restaurant man to step outside to the street with him, to save the furniture, saying something, contemptously, about a crusading spirit.

That spirit, along with a few teeth, had been knocked out of Smith. Scarcely able to see, he had crawled back inside and had erased what he had written, but from then on Flint McAfee had proclaimed that there should be only the one restaurant, and that the big mirror should not be broken. It was a good way to spread the news—such news as Flint McAfee cared to have spread at all.

Since that day, chalked announcements on the mirror had told exactly what Flint McAfee had wanted told, and no more. In return, other beaneries had been discouraged, as well as an incipient newspaper or so, which might have rivaled this source of information. Accordingly, the place had made sufficient profit for Smith to buy plenty of whiskey. And whiskey, after his humiliation, seemed to constitute his one interest in life.

BOTTLE clutched in one hand now, Smith came lurching through the door of the Curlew Saloon and paused, blinking owlishly, as a gun spat sharply, once. Such sounds were too common in Curlew Creek to attract much attention. Even when, as now, one man was sprawled in the dust of the street, with his blood turning it to a dirty crimson mud. No one was paying any attention—for the good and sufficient reason that, a few paces away, Flint McAfee was just holstering a still-smoking gun.

Smith blinked again, and started to turn away as though he had not seen anything. Then he halted, stiffened. Some of the lurch of drunkeness seemed to go out of him. His blood-shot eyes narrowed, sharpened. His sagging shoulders straightened, and for a minute he somewhat resembled the man who had come to town a few years before, who had dared protest against such cold-blooded killings.

For the man outstretched in the dust was his friend. The only real friend he'd somehow managed to make and keep, during those years of degredation, a man who always treated him as if he saw something of the man, still existent in Smith. And now, like too many others before him, Tom Nellison was dead. Moreover, it was easy to see that he had been unarmed. That shot had been murder, cold and sure.

The whiskey-fog seemed to lift from Smith's brains, and he took a swift step forward, fists clenching, paying no heed to the sauntering indifference of the town marshal whom McAfee had imported months before, to give the town a name for law and order. The marshal quickened his step a little, scowling, but Smith returned the scowl. Men, sensing drama, turned to watch.

Then abruptly, as though struck, Smith halted, at the sight of Flint McAfee turning to look at him, at the cold mockery blazing in the killer's eyes.

I've just been doing a little cleaning up of the town," McAfee said. "Ridding it of an undesirable character. What you might call a project in civic betterment. As proprietor of our beanery and owner of our big mirror of public opinion, you approve, of course, Smith?"

The marshal had turned and was walking the other way. The fire seemed to drain out of Smith. Before that cold, mocking gaze, his anger evaporated. The old, paralizing fear clutched him again, the nightmare which had been with him for a week of delerium, following the terrible beating he had taken at this man's hands. It was a fear, like the words which had come after it, which he could not beat down, which had made him what he was—a broken sop.

"You're lucky," McAfee had told him mercilessly. "I'm keeping you alive, keeping you and your mirror, and seeing that you have no competition—just so that everybody can look in that mirror and at you and know that this is my town. Otherwise I'd kill you—and if there's ever a next time, I will. Don't forget!"

Smith hadn't forgotten. Even whiskey couldn't make him forget, though it could numb the pain, partially still the self-disgust which went with it. Nodding shakily now, he turned, stumbled away down the street. After all, Tom Nellison was dead. . . And nothing that he might attempt to do would bring the dead back to life.

AT THE door of the restaurant, Smith paused, tipped the half-filled bottle, and drank until it was empty. Then, brow wet with a clammy sweat, eyes seeming to pop from his head, he staggered to the back room adjoining the kitchen, where he slept, and sank into a chair.

But this time, the whiskey didn't seem to help. He could still see the body of the man who had been his friend, cruelly murdered. . . And he was supposed to ignore that, as he had ignored all such happens for three years now. And to take note of it, as he must do with every death, by chalking a line across the mirror, giving a distorted version of the facts. Further condemning a man already dead. Drunk or no, that was his unenviable task, a part of the price he paid for living—and whiskey.

He stood up, clutched a piece of chalk, and went out into the public room, empty for the moment. He approached the mirror, scratched now by chalk, raised his hand, and

let it fall again, maggots of despair eating at his brain.

Somewhat blearily, he became aware that he was no longer alone. Someone had entered from the street, quick, impatient, had crossed to stare from him to the mirror and back again. A big man with fire in his eye and a jut to a stubborn chin. He leaned there now, resting his knuckles on the desk, a mixture of disgust and contempt only half-hidden on his face.

"You're Smith, aren't you?" he said. "Mort Smith, owner of this place?"

"That's me," Smith mumbled, and closed his eyes for a moment, wondering if the whiskey was playing him tricks. This man talked and walked just about as he had—three years before.

"My name's Bindloss," the newcomer explained. "I'm a cook myself. You know of the killing which took place in town, today? But I know you do. I'm told that you saw it—and that the murdered man was the best friend, and about the only friend, that you had in town."

"Yes," Smith agreed reluctantly. "That's right."

"I know how you announce every death in here, on your mirror," the other man went on bitingly. "I've heard all about it. So I suppose, Nellison being your friend, that you're going to mirror the truth for once, and say that it was a dirty, cowardly killing—and denounce his murderer?"

The hard eyes bored challengingly into Smith's.

"Oh, I know how you've always done in the past—condoning murder! But this is different. This man was your friend. And, you see, Tom Nellison was my friend, too. I came here to see him—and got here just too late. But, by God, his obituary isn't going to be a lie. This time, you'll write the truth on your mirror! Do you understand?"

Something of the fire in the other man seemed to communicate itself to Smith. For just a moment. His eyes brightened with it, he half-raised the hand holding the chalk, then let it fall again. Slowly, staring as if fascinated, Smith shook his head.

"No," he said.

"No?" The stranger's contempt was biting. "Why not? Is it that you're afraid!"

"Yes," Smith agreed unemotionally. "Yes, that's it. I'm afraid—and I've learned not to be a fool. Besides, it couldn't help. Tom's—dead!"

"I'd been told that you were just a yellow dog, a lickspittle of this Flint McAfee," Bindloss said bitingly. "And I've heard plenty about your mirror. But I did think that, if you had a spark of manhood in you, you might revolt, when your friend was murdered. However," and now the contempt stung like a whip-lash. "I didn't think it likely. So here's what I really came for."

Bindloss leaned a little forward, resting bony knuckles on the edge of the desk.

"I intend to see to it that Tom Nellison doesn't go unavenged. The only way to do that is to print the truth for all to see, right here on this mirror—no other place would do, the way you've built the mirror up. You're afraid to do it, of course, afraid of McAfee. Well, sell me the restaurant. He only allows one in town, but he can't stop you from selling it. I'll pay you a fair price, and with the money, you can get out of town, out of the country. Maybe you can even start again, fresh, somewhere else. That's up to you. I want the place, and with it, I'll give Flint McAfee the truth on that mirror, and a fight that he'll never forget!"

He paused, and Smith stared back at him incredulously. Here was the sort of man he had been, when he had first come to Curlew Creek.

And here too was the thing he had hoped for, so desperately and hopelessly—being offered to him. A chance to get out of this town, to get away from it all. No one else had ever been willing to buy at any price.

"I figure two thousand dollars is a fair price," Bindloss went on. "I've got it in cash."

He whipped out a long red purse, opened it, spread the money on the counter—crisp, crackling new bills. Smith's eyes ran over it, hungrily, he half-reached out to touch it, then drew back. Slowly he shook his head.

"No," he whispered.

Bindloss' eyes narrowed angrily.

"So you want to hold me up, do you?" he demanded. "Well, I'm going to have this place." He emptied the pocketbook. "I'm making it three thousand!"

Again, more decisively, Smith shook his head.

"No," he repeated.

"Damn it, man, I've got to have that mirror," Bindloss exclaimed. "You're a rat, not a man, and you aim to hold me up. All right! I can get hold of more money. Name your price! But Tom Nellison is going to be avenged."

Once more, Smith shook his head.

"You'd better—get out of town," he said. "You'd just—just get yourself killed, is all, if I sold you this place."

"I'll run the risk of that. Name your price."

"No. This—mirror, isn't for sale. At any price!"

TEN MINUTES later, finally convinced of that, frustrated and furiously angry. Bindloss stomped out. Smith sat there, watching the door unseeingly. Finally he reached for the bottle, and finding it empty, set it down again mechanically. Then a new thought jerked him erect. For a moment he stared around, wildly. Then he was out of the door and heading down the street, almost at a run.

What he saw caused him to break into a full run. Some three blocks away, two men were in the middle of the street, talking. Smith couldn't hear the words, but he could see a few bystanders, watching furtively, could understand well enough without words. Bindloss had encountered Flint McAfee—or else he had deliberately sought him out. And now he was challenging him.

Not that it ever required much to move Flint McAfee to fight. With either guns or fists. This time it was to be fists. Smith saw the beginning—and the ending. None of the pile-driver effect had been lost from the boss' ham-like hands in three years. It was over with, that part, in far less time than the battle which Smith had put up, and which had so nearly killed him. Bindloss sprawled in the dust as limply as Tom Nellison had done a few hours earlier.

The breath was sobbing in Smith's throat as he ran, for now Bindloss was starting to stir—and Flint McAfee, with that same cold deliberation, was starting to reach for his gun, to finish it.

"Don't kill him," Smith panted. "I—I'll get him out of town."

"You'd better finish the job you started, McAfee," Bindloss raged, struggling to an elbow. "It's either me or you!"

Strangely, the challenge seemed to amuse Flint McAfee, as a glance convinced him that Bindloss was unarmed. And more. He had twisted an ankle in falling, could barely stand now as he struggled up.

"All right, Smith, get him out of town—before night," McAfee ordered curtly. "If he's here tomorrow, I'll finish it."

Turning on his heel, he stalked away. Raging, Bindloss permitted Smith to help him across to the nearby hotel. The stage station was next door. But he swore grimly that he wasn't taking the stage out—far from it.

But for the rest of the day he was safe—and compelled, whether he liked it or not, to go lie down, since he couldn't walk alone. Smith returned to the restaurant. The anger that had blazed in his face when Tom Nellison had died had been replaced by a colder, steadier wrath. With the new day, Flint McAfee would be out to kill, exactly as he had promised.

He hunted up his desk, almost hidden under dust and an accumulation of debris untouched for months. In a drawer he found a six-shooter, and twirled the cylinders. The gun was a bit rusty, but with a few drops of oil, it spun smoothly again. But when he tried to steady it on anything, his eyes blurred, his hand shook. No, it just wouldn't do—not that way.

The big room was empty now. Slowly, Smith walked in to it, picked up his chalk, and wrote across the mirror. Not the fine, firm hand he'd once used for this job, but still readable. He was nearing the end of the message when the cook came in to the room. Smith hadn't suspected that

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his man could read English, but after a slow look at it, the cook untied his apron, and padded silently out. Smith knew what that meant.

By the time he reached the kitchen, it was empty, though supper was well started. Mechanically, a little rusty, Smith went to work. He could still cook—now that the whiskey fumes were being driven from his head by something more impelling.

NOW the supper crowd was coming. He hurried to serve them, saw the startled look on faces as men read what he had written across the mirror—a message similar to what had been written there three years before. An obituary which Tom Nellison would have been proud of.

Reading it, men were shying away, as they had done before on a memorable occasion, looking nervously at Smith. He served them in silence, and though he was in the kitchen when Flint McAfee entered the restaurant, he knew it instantly by the sudden hush which fell over the place.

McAfee, perched on a stool at the counter, had just finished reading the lines when Smith entered again. His gaze was baleful.

"So?" he rasped. "The shooting of Tom Nellison was cold-blooded murder, was it? And it's long past the time when I should be dead, eh?"

"You're right, both times. And that's a good obituary, don't you think?" Smith asked, and strangely, the old, numbing terror was dead in him, leaving only a calm, cold indifference. He was going to die—he had known that when he started writing across the mirror. But now it didn't matter.

"I should have killed you long ago," McAfee growled. "But your sort isn't important, and I never allow trifles to spoil my supper. Bring it on!"

Smith did so, ladling out a bowl of soup. McAfee looked at it narrowly, laid his gun on the counter, close to his hand.

"Like some kings, I need a taster," he said. "Otherwise, some fool might try to poison me. You taste it, a couple of spoonfuls, Mr. Smith."

Everyone was watching, silently, as McAfee piled insult on humiliation. Smith approached, outwardly unchanged. He reached toward the bowl of soup, snatched it suddenly and flung it into McAfee's face.

He'd been resigned to the inevitable, up to then. Knowing that he was being a fool, and that fools must die. Now overwhelming rage drove out the fear. At least, he'd give McAfee one more fight!

Blinded, McAfee was clawing at his eyes, then grabbing for his gun. He brought up staring, to see it in Smith's hand, the muzzle inches from his own head.

"March out of this restaurant," Smith ordered grimly. "And don't ever set foot inside it again. It's been polluted long enough!"

The silence held while McAfee walked to the door and out, Smith close at his heels. There, McAfee spun suddenly, ducking, lashing out wildly. Had he but known it, he had little to fear from the gun. His head and shoulders were wobbling hazily in Smith's gaze.

But as he ducked and turned, Smith smashed hard with the barrel of the gun, felt it rake along his enemy's skull. It was wrenched from his grasp, he was being beaten down, down into darkness. But his fingers found a hold, and clung with the unyielding determination of a bulldog. Whatever happened, he'd keep McAfee's attention from Bindloss, for a while.

Smith came up, out of the darkness, to find men bending over him, among them Bindloss, hobbling on a cane. And now the scorn and contempt was gone from his eyes.

"I sure take back everything I said," he said. "What you did took plenty nerve. And then finishin' him the way you did—"

"Finishin' him?" Smith repeated, dazedly.

"Sure. He's Boothill bait now. He tried to kill you—and you clipped him alongside the head with that gun, then grabbed his throat and hung on, takin' all he could give you, till he quit—for good. He near killed you, but when it comes to fightin', it's hard to lick a Bindloss."

"A Bindloss?" Smith repeated, and his eyes brightened. "Then you know?"

"Took me a while to recognize you," his brother conceded. "You've been usin' a different name since you figured you were disgraced. But you're a Bindloss—and you can look at yourself in that mirror again and be proud of the man you see!"

BIG BLOW at BONEDRY BUTTE

By GIFF CHESHIRE

As soon as young Sam Taft constructed a working windmill on the hell-hot Bonedry spread, he planned to head for a greener, richer range.... But a band of gunhung tinhorns had other plans for the drifter's special talents: Digging another excavation —size just six-by-three!

They both saw Ezra Plunkett pound over the rise.

THE SOUND of the wind whistling through the steel tower that rose above him filled Sam Taft with quiet satisfaction. There were weeks on end in this Bonedry Buttes section, he had been told, when no breath of air stirred, when the summer sun deepened the burnt brown of the interminable rock lifts, when the sprawling high desert acres could sustain little life. For this reason, he had been roundly advised, a man was a tarnation fool to be thinking of a windmill.

Yet this was the second such tower Sam had raised on Ezra Plunkett's Bonedry

spread. The first had been down below this high rise and over one of Plunkett's feeble shallow wells, and the tower had barely seen completion. Then the riders had come from the adjoining OJ spread and pulled it down with their lass-ropes. Otis Jenkins, a dour and burly man, has issued some specifications:

"You flag your hind end on outta this country, Taft! Ezra Plunkett can keep on pumping water for his critters outta his wells by hand! He don't want no windmill. You're trying to swindle him! Take your outfit and find someplace where there's wind enough to run it!"

Al Ordwich had told Sam how it would be in this high desert country. Ordwich was a travelling salesman for the windmill manufacturer, and he went ahead of Sam selling the idea and getting down payments and signature on the company's routine contracts. Then the company put down the big-bladed wind motors, pumps, the structural parts for the tower and sundry fittings at the nearest freight point. Whereupon Sam Taft came along to do the installing.

"Got one order in that whole country!" Ordwich had told Sam the last time they ran into each other. "A tough old jigger named Ezra Plunkett. One thing a young cuss like you'll like, though, is he's got a mighty pretty daughter. Plunkett's got what they call the Bonedry spread. It's across a good year-round creek from the OJ, and that Otis Jenkins is a tough cuss. Warned me against selling Plunkett a windmill. But I sold him, and it's your job to set it up!" And Ordwich had laughed and caught the stage for the next town.

Sam was pretty certain now he had run into something more than the normal objection some regions have to innovation. He had grown convinced he had come up against a case of out-and-out rascality. But he had considered that none of his business until the OJ pulled down his unfinished tower, which had made it very much his concern.

Ezra Plunkett's Bonedry spread was situated in a hot, badly broken section. Ezra's motherless daughter Mary had told Sam it was only her father's bullheadedness that had ever led him to think he could run cattle on it. He had got a chance to buy it cheaply, which had been one big inducement.

Here where Sam had constructed his second and taller tower was a high rock ridge that skirted Plunkett's spread to the south. The ridge terminated to southward in a sheer sixty foot drop to year-round Cotton Creek. Plunkett had several hundred feet of such frontage on the creek, and he had had some vague idea of finding a way to get his stock down the cliff to water. It hadn't worked out. Whereupon he had fallen back on the time-honored practice of hand digging shallow wells. He had been getting by that way for three-four years, but it had limited the capacity of his spread to the point of poverty.

It had been hard at first for Sam to see why anybody should covet those hot and sterile reaches. Then he began to understand that though they were more or less uselessly themselves, they could be valuable adjunct to the OJ, which had changed ownership a couple of years before. A cowman needed three things on his spread if he was to prosper: grass, water, and winter shelter. The OJ already possessed the first two. The canyons and rocky cliffs of Bonedry Buttes would give them ideal protection against winter ravages.

So the day the OJ riders pulled the tower down, Sam had just stood there with fury rising in him. He hadn't been foolish enough to tackle a dozen armed men. But it had given him a personal stake in the situation, and it set him to thinking hard.

THIS second and far larger tower was the result of that. Using Plunkett's crowbait team and wagon he had dismantled the wrecked tower, salvaged what he could, and hauled it here to this high rock ridge. He had ordered a far larger wind motor from the company, together with a lot of three inch water pipe, and he had put considerable of his own savings into it.

He had built a tower that fifty riders weren't going to pull over with their ketch-ropes, here on the bluff above Cotton Creek. He had drilled and blasted out deep footings for each of the four steel legs. He had concreted the footings into the sheer rock.

On the creek side of the buttes there was a sheer sixty foot drop to water. On the opposite side was a drop of thirty-odd feet,

then a long slant of several hundred yards, falling down to the flats where Plunkett ran his stock. About a quarter of a mile below the tower there was a sink a couple of hundred yards across. Sam Taft proposed to make this the bed of his pond for Ezra Plunkett.

He was going to drop a pipe to the creek, and connect it to a double action pump at the base of the tower, which would surge water into another pipe dropping down the opposite bluff and slanting on down for a distance of several hundred feet. There it would flow into the ditch Ezra had already dug with his team and a scraper, running on down to the sink.

He would have, in effect, a huge syphon which the windmill would start but which would run whenever desired. There was a big valve at the lower end of the syphon. As soon as the windmill had water rushing through, this valve could be closed abruptly, keeping the pipe full of trapped water. Then a pair of valves under the tower could be opened to cut the flow around the pump. When the lower valve was opened the syphoning action would start, and it could be kept going until the sink below was filled. Then it could be shut down, Bonedry cattle could drink their fill, and there would be an ample reserve, to be maintained on the rare days when Ezra Plunkett would have enough wind to run his pump for a few minutes and prime the syphon again.

There was only one thing standing between Sam Taft and a complete triumph over the dry buttes and the OJ outfit. Would it work in practice as well as it sounded in theory?

And this strange, new feel to the weather. Sam looked up at the big wind motor some sixty feet above his head. It was idle, the big blades with no life in them, and it was the stillness that disturbed Sam. He had got to know this feel to the atmosphere in the plains country. He knew this hot quiet was creating a hugh vacuum extending over many miles. It was a wind-breeder. Too much wind. A twister now would make a mockery of his back-breaking work and hot-headed cunning.

He heard a rider coming and turned. He relaxed when he saw it was Mary Plunkett, dressed in her usual boy's garb and pounding up the long slant toward him. Sam pulled off his hat to let the perspiration dry on his forehead, leaning against a big tower leg.

Mary rode up. "Ready to try it, Sam?"

He grinned sourly. "Ready to try it, if we had wind."

"We're going to get it, Sam."

Sam nodded soberly. That morning he had told her he would run a test that day, given sufficient wind, and had promised to wait until she could be on hand to see it. She looked at him thoughtfully and said:

"If it works, I suppose you'll show us how to run it, then be on your way."

"Yeah, I reckon so. There'll be mail for me in town. Al Ordwich'll have sold a few more mills."

"Don't you get tired of being always on the jump?"

After a moment's reflection, Sam shook his head. "Can't say I do. Get tireder standing still." He was stirred a little by her questioning him so. In all the weeks he had boarded at the Plunkett's, they had been good friends but nothing more. He had admired her for the man-to-man basis on which she met him, the man's part she took in helping her father run the poverty-stricken little spread. Yet there had been a few times when he had seen the woman in her, too, and it had struck some cord deep within him. He had shut himself against it. Sam Taft was not a marrying man, he was not a stay-putter.

THEY stayed throughout the hot afternoon, talking little, waiting for a stir of air to turn the big blades. None came. Alternately Sam feared there would never again be enough wind to fill his huge syphon or that when it came it would arrive with ruinous force and volume. Luck seemed against him again.

Sam awakened early the next morning and hurried to the bedroom window, and stood silently for a moment, his eyes wide with excitement. The leaves on the lilac bush out in the dooryard were rippling! He dressed hurriedly.

Mary was in the kitchen, and breakfast was fixed. At her insistance, Sam waited long enough to eat, then she said, "The devil with the work, this morning! I'm going with you!"

The atmosphere still had that strange, disturbing feeling.

The pumping mechanism had been left in neutral, and as they hurried up the slant Sam could see the big blades turning. Excitement pounded through him, but he did not speak. He forgot even the girl as he dismounted under the tower, ran to throw the lever that harnessed the windmill to the water pump. He watched tensely as the big piston started moving. Water gushing in spurts from a test pet-cock told him that so far it was working. As soon as the long pipe was full, he rode down the slant and shut the lower valve. He returned, and with a pounding heart opened the circuit around the pump.

Five minutes later he was standing at the foot of fall, watching water from Cotton Creek gushing into the sink on the opposite side of the cliff. He had licked Bonedry Buttes! From now on Ezra Plunkett's cattle could water from their own lake!

Mary had a curious expression on her face when Sam returned to the tower. She said, "Sam! Sam! It works! But—look—!" She pointed across the flat country to the south.

Sam stared in that direction. A high arc of the sky had turned ominously black. With no conscious thought, he knew in his heart what was coming. The twister! He had forgotten the danger in his excitement, but now dismay shook him. By some malignity of chance, he was likely to lose his invention at the very point of proving it's worth! He searched his mind desperately, but knew there was nothing on earth he could do.

"Mary," he snapped. "Head for the house!"

"No! No, Sam! I'm staying with you!"

He could see trees bending, a little to his left, then, like the concussion from a gigantic explosion, the first malevolent wind hit the buttes. It shrieked as it rushed through the tower, the big blades racing madly, then with equal abruptness there was calm.

Sam was grabbing wrenches. "Go, Mary!" He did not look at her as he headed for the narrow ladder running up the tower. He went up it, two rungs at a time. He knew that this calm would last but a few minutes, knew also that he had to remove the blades from the motor if it and the tower were not to be shaken to pieces in the coming blast.

The wind brisked again, and as he gained elevation, Sam could see the core of the twister far to the south. It danced like a black dervish, swaying a little, and there was no guessing its exact direction. Carrying the wrenches and the end of a light line, he climbed on.

The wind was stiff enough that he was holding on with difficulty when he reached the small platform on top the tower. The big motor blades were whirling like mad things, screaming to the accompaniment of the chattering journals and gears. Moving so, there was nothing on earth he could do to them, and he prayed for another calm.

Yet the wind only rose in fury as the advance elements of the big air migration reached and passed him. Sam stretched out flat on the narrow platform, fingers clamped on the steel, an awful tightness in his stomach. The girl stood directly below him, eyes upturned anxiously. The gust rose, spent itself, then began to subside.

Sam worked furiously in the minutes that followed, removing the nut and cone from the big axle on which the blades whirled. He secured the rope to it, took a snub on a length of steel, then with his foot pushed the blades from the axle. The wind whipped up again as he frantically lowered the assembly to the ground.

He went down the ladder as rapidly as he had ascended, but even so he had difficulty clinging to the rungs as he neared the ground. Dropping free, at last, he saw Ezra Plunkett pound over the rise on a horse.

"What in blazes're you doing up here? Ain't you got sense enough to see what's coming?"

"My fault, Ezra," Sam returned. "I had to get the blades free or the whole thing would shake apart. You take her and make tracks!"

IT WAS too late. The twister was dancing now not over two or three miles below them, crossing the big OJ. The devilish black core appeared likely to pass them a little to the east, but they would be caught in the sidewhip. But they seemed safer here than they would be if caught before they reached the house.

Sweat stood out on Sam's palms as he waited, helpless to do anything further as the rising wind shrieked through the tower structure. Then they found what

shelter they could in the rocks to the right, at a distance sufficient to be clear should the tower crash.

The next fifteen minutes were a nightmare of rushing air, flying objects and banshee sound. The black dervish danced by, well to the left, but there were moments when the tower seemed to bend before Sam's very eyes. Then the girl cried:

"Sam, it's passed!"

Still scarcely able to stand straight, Sam rushed to the tower. The footing was still solid, and not a steel had been warped out of line. A tremendous relief rushed through him. The danger over, Ezra Plunkett was grinning.

"You built her solid, boy!"

A strange elation was swelling in Sam. "If she can stand through a twister, I reckon nothing can pull her down!"

"I reckon you'll get a chance to find out right now! Looks like some OJ riders coming!"

Sam turned to sight along Plunkett's pointing arm. A half dozen riders were sloping across the flat beyond Cotton Creek, apparently drawn forth to look out for the frightened stock. Now they were cutting toward Bonedry Buttes.

"I reckon they hanker to see if that twister done their work for them!" Sam breathed. An iron determination had risen in him. His plan had proved its worth and that it could survive the natural elements. It could survive the human element, too, and he meant to see to it that it did.

The riders crossed Cotton Creek down to the east, then swung back. "Plunkett!" Sam heard himself saying, "if I put up the money that puts water on your spread, would it buy me an interest in it?"

"It would!" A grin broke on the old man's whiskered lips. "But why?"

"I aim to exercise my rights and tell them jaspers to stay off our property!"

The OJ bunch reined up, and Otis Jenkins looked down at Sam. "I had a idea that heller took care of you for us, Taft!" he snapped. "Since it didn't, I ain't in the mood to fool with you anymore. I see you figured a way to lick the lack of wind. That was pretty smart, but you can start tearing that tower down! If you ain't got a good start on it by night, me'n the boys'll tend to it with dynamite!"

Sam looked at him for a long moment. He was only one against half a dozen, but he was unafraid.

"Jenkins," he returned calmly, "I've put water onto Bonedry Buttes! Me and Ezra Plunkett aim to build us a real spread. We'll stay on our own side of the creek and we won't ever trouble you any. We'll expect the same from you."

"You oughta have a good notion of what we expect from you!" Jenkins snorted. His hardcases stirred uneasily, setting their nerves and muscle for orders.

"If you're sticking to it!" Sam replied, "now's as good a time as any to settle it. Swing down, Jenkins, if you've got the guts to face me man to man. If you ain't go ahead and order your gunswifts to cut me down like the yellow skunks they are!"

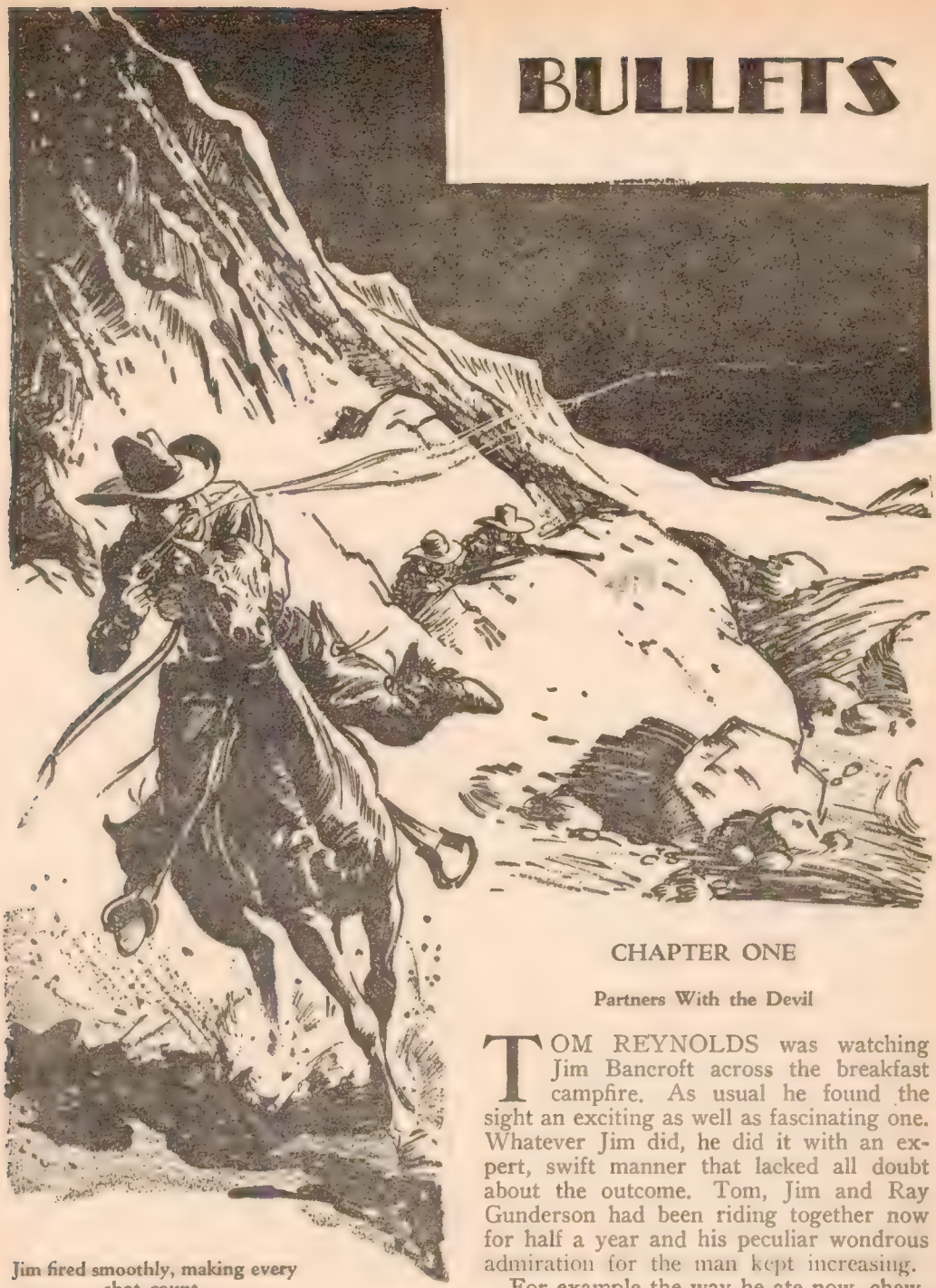
Astonishment registered in Jenkins' swart face as he stared back. For a long moment their gaze met and held, and it was the bullying OJ owner who broke first. He dipped his glance to the ground. Finally he muttered, "Now, let's don't go getting hasty, Taft! Reckon there ain't no good reason why we can't get along!" He jerked his head, and for a moment his riders hung in indecision, unable to decipher his meaning. Then Jenkins himself gigged horse, wheeled and thundered away.

Sam went back up to the tower, seeing now that many an aggressor acted on what was mostly bluff. All a man had to do was call it. But to be able to call it he had to have something to fill his heart. Its upheaval past, the air had calmed now until only a mild summer wind was blowing. Sam looked at the big blade assembly, then at Plunkett.

"Ezra, all we got to do is hoist her back up and bolt her on, and we can build us a nice pond! With water we can build us a nice spread!"

But in his heart he was thinking of deeper things. It was surprising what a solid feeling of satisfaction it gave a man when he had sunk his foundation into hard rock. Like the tower, Sam Taft knew, he had unconsciously gained such a foundation here on Bonedry Buttes. Like the tower, he could stand through any manner of upheaval thoughout the coming years. He glanced at Mary, warmed himself in her smile, then fell to work.

BULLETS



Jim fired smoothly, making every shot count.

CHAPTER ONE

Partners With the Devil

TOM REYNOLDS was watching Jim Bancroft across the breakfast campfire. As usual he found the sight an exciting as well as fascinating one. Whatever Jim did, he did it with an expert, swift manner that lacked all doubt about the outcome. Tom, Jim and Ray Gunderson had been riding together now for half a year and his peculiar wondrous admiration for the man kept increasing.

For example the way he ate now, chewing with his big teeth, munching the bacon

BURY THE PAST

By VAN CORT

To young Tom Reynolds, his new pardner was aces all the way. Why, give Jim Bancroft a few straggling longhorns and before you could say, "Vamoose," he'd have a real beef-herd. . . . Yet in a single moment of pounding, sickening red hell, Tom learned that not even the hottest running-iron was a match for the blazing anger of an honest fighting man!

and biscuits and washing them down with large drafts of strong black coffee—it was as if he'd never eaten such things before, the way he enjoyed that food. Every day was a brand new day and better than the one that had gone by.

Bancroft had a harsh and ready laughter; he was big and light and wide-shouldered in the saddle, big of head and face and voice. Russet hair, thick, ruddy cheeks—and those strange powerful eyes, blue, with little sparkles of gold in them. There was, Tom thought, a curious snicker behind his voice when he spoke, as if life was one big joke, and always on the other fellow.

Take for instance the way Bancroft joined up with him and Ray. He and Ray had been working for a small outfit which had gone bankrupt, and they had been forced to take a lot of back pay in scrubby stock. They were drifting up along the Nordholm trail, looking listlessly either for a buyer or some vacant range, when they during a drinking spree got talking to Bancroft, in a little town called Broken Wagon.

So they had three hundred head of stock they didn't know what to do with? Well, that was no trouble at all—he, Bancroft, had one hundred—suppose the three of them together had four or maybe five hundred, they'd have something; they could drift it slowly northeast to a little town he knew about, where there was a railhead, and a buyer probably could be found. They'd fatten the stock on the way and it wouldn't cost them much.

Ray Gunderson, a slow, not too bright character had been very impressed by Jim Bancroft. He had nodded eagerly at the prospect of turning cattle into money. Tom had thought about it, and Bancroft had decided the issue. Suddenly they were partners.

They had picked up Bancroft's stock in a little box canyon outside of town and the road brand he had on it had looked kind of funny on some of the animals, but there it was. They drifted along very leisurely and the beeves collected considerable tallow and Bancroft's fast talk and aggressive but smooth manner kept them out of shooting trouble when irate ranchers couldn't see why they had to cross their ranges. A little mavericking was done on the side, as Jim Bancroft put it, to while the time away, and as the three now neared the little railhead of Ferguson, their herd counted close to five hundred head. And Jim Bancroft was undisputed boss of the outfit.

That was what Tom Reynolds was thinking about now at breakfast, for it had just occurred to him with its full impact, and he realized that he did not like it. He had had dreams of his own outfit; instead now everything went according to Bancroft's ideas.

THE big man got to his feet and strode for his horse while the others collected the eating gear. "Time to get a hustle on," he announced. "We want to hit that town around one o'clock an' catch that feller for the deal."

Reynolds lit an extra smoke and looked after the man while Ray dumped the grounds from the coffeepot and sanded out the frying pan. Some kind of queer resentment he didn't know he had in him suddenly boiled to the surface, and he caught himself wondering if Bancroft was as fast with a gun as he bragged.

Gently the three men lifted the herd from the bed ground and began hazing it along. The animals moved leisurely, cropping grass as they went. It was slow and tedious travel and Tom began thinking it would be nice once it was over with; that he'd seen enough cows to last him a while.

An hour later, as they were traversing a stretch of sandy territory, a rider came suddenly swinging out of the drag dust and headed for the three men. "Look," said Tom to Bancroft. "Two more behind him. What do you think?"

The second and third strangers were keeping to the distance. Bancroft said at once, "Let me handle this," his eye gaining a sharp measuring, almost eager gleam. His glance roved the field like a general's before battle. "See them boulders over there? Mosey over that way—good cover for you two if anything should come of this."

Ray Gunderson laughed a little nervously as if he knew what was coming and had expected it. "Trail cutters," he said. "Or I eat my hat."

"Move on," said Jim Bancroft sharply.

As Tom and Ray moved toward the rocks the first stranger came within hailing distance. Bancroft did not answer the hail but sat his horse, waiting till the other came close enough to talk.

"This your herd?"

That required no answer; Bancroft still sat just watching the man with a calm frosty stare. The stranger shifted a little in the saddle, holding his horse under a tight rein. "Name of Daggett," he said eventually in a clipped tone. "Me and my men here rep for a few brands in Turner county—the R.B., the Rocking Horse, L. Sunrise, Broken Stirrup and a few others."

"So?" said Bancroft. The way the man had mentioned the brands carried a both subtle and aggressive insinuation. The speaker was a peculiarly stubborn, wiry sort. He had an easy insolence and his eyes were clear, frosty blue like March creek water.

Bancroft's voice was utterly flat. "Do tell; kind of far from home, ain't yuh?"

"Maybe so. We been followin' you gents along a little ways, looking your beef over. I'm afeared there's a few head here and there we'll have to cut from your bunch."

The sudden broad smile from Jim Bancroft's white teeth and his completely pleasant tone as he bowed courteously in the saddle, would chill any man's spine. "You don't say so."

It had its effect and made a little pause; the three men looked carefully at the three others; then Daggett said: "For your information, I brought Sheriff Martin out from Ferguson—an' I'll show you my papers . . ."

"See that trail?" said Bancroft abruptly, pointing southwest.

Daggett did not look in the direction so Bancroft went on: "Just hit it, an' hit it damn fast while you got time."

The trailcutter's fingers, spread out, played near the edge of his coat; the cold blue eyes were steady on Bancroft. "You mean you want trouble about this?"

"Right here and now."

The cutter's fingers never reached his hip; Smoke swirled abruptly about Jim Bancroft's waist and Daggett seemed to nod agreeably of a sudden, then leaned far over the neck of his horse, coughed some blood into the mane before he toppled clumsily to the ground.

By that time the two other riders were throwing their horses about, pulling rifles from scabbards; by that time also Jim Bancroft was on the ground, his own rifle working. Tom Reynolds would always remember him so clearly, standing there easily, legs spread apart, rifle at cheek, calm as a skeet shooter, swinging first in one direction and firing, then without a waste motion bringing the sights to bear on the third rider and squeezing the trigger when the aim was true. No faltering, no fuss, no stumbling—a timing so swift and beautiful, and suddenly three riderless horses were milling in bewilderment on the plain. One man got up to catch stirrup and rein and run a few feet with his mount, and Bancroft shot him again and he bent forward and went down on his head and lay still.

Tom was white and shaky as he dismounted and saw Bancroft walk out calmly, his rifle at ready, and examine each of his shots. Gunderson was still in the saddle, chewing hard on his lips. Nausea fought hard in Tom Reynolds' stomach and he would have liked to get rid of his breakfast; but he managed to keep it. This was a new Jim Bancroft and the shock of it rattled him some.

"All three?" he got over his lips as Bancroft returned. He needed no answer; and he then queried, somewhat shakily, "Was this the smart move, Jim?"

Bancroft was reloading; he looked up quickly. "This close to pay-off, after all this riding—we should let anyone trip our play? You worked for that beef, didn't you, Tom?"

Ray Gunderson commented at last, sucking in his breath and making his voice hard, "Them fellers prob'ly wish they'd stayed to home now; if they could . . ." He tried to laugh, but couldn't.

Suddenly Bancroft relaxed, laughed again and was almost his old self as Tom Reynolds was used to knowing him. "Damn fools; coming up here an' asking me to my teeth if they can cut my herd—beats me." He shook his head in near-amusement, then glanced out over the plain. "We better hustle and get rid of them right now."

THEY buried men, saddles, gear and all; and the whole time Tom's stomach was a little tight-squeezed ball, hard as stone. He wondered if he would ever be able to get food in it again. When they came to the man who had got up and had tried to get away, Ray said, "This here is the lawman from Ferguson," holding up a deputy's badge.

Bancroft looked at it. "Saves us trouble in that town." And Reynolds could not take his glance from those queer gold-flecked blue eyes of the man who spoke so calmly; something in him was squirming and changing and would never be the same again. The deputy sheriff was a young, handsome man in his prime. Tom caught himself wondering who might be waiting at home for this man. He could not shake off the sickness he felt all over.

Ray kept fondling the badge. "It's a pretty thing," he said. "I do believe it's solid silver an' all. What'll we do with it?"

Bancroft threw him a quick, measuring glance; he seemed to be considering something for a moment, then he said, impatiently: "Throw it down; throw it down, you fool—unless you want to hang while carrying it!"

Ray let it slip out of his fingers as though it was red hot and it fell into the shallow trench they had dug under a cut bank. When they had covered the bodies some they walked their horses back and forth along the edge until the bank collapsed and made the burial complete.

Tom looked back at the place from the saddle and had a tight feeling about his throat. He ran his hand over his Adam's apple . . . No, that damned invisible rope was still there. Would he ever get rid of it?

Jim Bancroft, watching him, said, in a joking tone which shuddered Tom, "What's the matter, kid? Don't your breakfast set right? Don't look back!"

So they rode on with the herd, and Tom kept thinking that maybe he would get over this—after all he had fired no shots. But the farther he rode the tighter the rope around his neck got. It wasn't as simple as that—maybe some people could shoot three men out of the saddle and bury them and forget about it. He couldn't.

Outside of Ferguson they milled the herd a quarter mile away from the railroad yard, and Tom began thinking, "Maybe once I get my money out of this and get on my trail I'll feel a little better. Maybe I can forget about it after a while. . . ."

Jim Bancroft was saying: "I'll ride on in and see Baker. You two better stay here with the herd." He was already kneeing his horse around.

Ray Gunderson nodded, glad to shed responsibility, when Tom heard his own voice reach out at Bancroft. It was surprisingly calm and sharp: "We're partners; we'll all go in. The herd will take care of itself here by this water hole."

Bancroft eyed him suddenly. "All right," he said. "Follow me."

CHAPTER TWO

Sixgun Division

JONATHAN BAKER, banker and co-owner of the railroad, turned out to be a sharp-nosed, shrewd-looking gent with deceptive blue eyes and a shock of white hair. He leaned back in his chair and shook his head at the three men with a wry smile: "Can't ship your cattle till two weeks from now. Those cars you saw on the line out there have been spoken for by somebody else. . . . I'm sorry."

Tom began sweating. They had no range, nor steady water, nor money to buy feed for the herd. Things were getting dry. There was no telling what the beef would look like in another two weeks of drifting around. The three of them sat silently in their chairs and almost automatically both he and Ray looked to Jim Bancroft.

Then Jim Bancroft began to talk. "I have the better beef," he said. "I always have the better beef; but I'll match this other man's price. . . . I'll tell you what I'll do: You buy and ship my herd now and I'll cut you in for twenty percent of the sale. . . ." Before anyone could speak up, he went on, "And another thing: Everytime from now on you can get me priority on shipping I'll cut you in for twenty percent—it'll be like a kind of partnership." He waited for the words to sink in, then said, "All right, am I talking or doing?"

Baker seemed to forget about Tom and Ray being in the office. He was studying Bancroft. Something about the man seemed to hypnotize him; the power of Bancroft's personality, that confident, easy will behind the smiling, gold-flecked eyes. He said eventually: "You're a very doing man, it seems to me. I'll have a look at that cattle of yours."

In the evening the herd was taken off their hands and loaded onto the train. Jim Bancroft's pockets were filled with cash

and the three men, weary and dusty, but with somewhat lighter minds, stabled their horses and walked down the main street of Ferguson, headed for Martin's hotel. Tom was thinking. "I'll get me a night's sleep and I'll ride on in the morning—by myself."

He stopped momentarily in the doorway to the lobby and gazed back down to the end of the street where the dust was still settling over the cattle pens by the railroad. Beyond, the trail led over the slowly rising plain. It seemed that he for a second saw three horsemen outlined on the horizon. He shook his head and blinked against the setting sun. Now he saw nothing.

He suddenly felt Bancroft's harsh grip on his arm. "Don't look back, kid. That's all done with. What you need is a drink."

"Yeah," said Ray Gunderson at once. "Let's have a drink."

They walked to the bar and poured three fingers each, of the best the house had. "Down she goes," said Bancroft with a grin. "Here's to luck and a long life."

He tossed his liquor off and the other two followed suit, Tom Reynolds standing quietly, letting the whiskey eat into the stone in his stomach. Gradually he began feeling a little more at ease and when Bancroft said, "Eat?" he followed the two others readily to the dining room.

After the meal Bancroft lit a cigar and eased himself back in his chair, breaking the till now hungry silence. "About the accounting—I figure I brought you pretty near half that herd. Right? Well, that leaves, shall we say, forty percent for me and twenty for each of you, seeing that I'm willing to pay half of Baker's cut instead of just a third. Fair enough?"

Tom Reynolds let that one sink in; then a curious anger boiled up in him. Ray's placid face irritated him. "You're getting much too bighearted with that herd of *yours*, Jim—next thing you know you'll be going to church."

A little surprised light popped into the other's strong eyes. "Where'd our little herd be now," he laughed, "If somebody hadn't been quick to think and fast on the trigger, smart enough to clinch a deal? You two hombres are very good at sitting on your butts with your mouths closed. Thanks to me the herd got bigger on the way; thanks to me we got rid of it and got cash in hand right now."

"Talking about cash, I'll take mine right now."

Bancroft kept on smiling. "I was coming to that. I have a proposition . . . You want to leave most of your money in the partnership . . . I got some plans for this town . . . or do you want to go it for yourself now?"

Before Tom could answer Bancroft turned to Ray Gunderson: "Well, what do you say, Ray?"

"For me, Jim. I guess I'll throw in with you. What do you want to do, Tom?"

Tom Reynolds looked from one to the other. It seemed to him that Ray was just a goodnatured steer, letting himself be let into a chute. As for himself, he still hadn't got rid of the stone in his stomach; not quite. Again a peculiar anger crystalized something in him. "I'll take the hard, cold cash right on the table here, Jim."

Bancroft looked at him for a moment; he drummed on the table. "All right, all right," he said with a queer finality and began counting money out on the table. "No hard feelings, Tom?"

"About the percentage, Jim," said Tom grittily. "I started that herd with Ray. I did my share of work. Count out a third of that money to me."

Bancroft's hands became still. He looked up with a slow smile. "Twenty percent, Tom; twelve hundred."

Well, maybe he should just get his money and get out; but something new in him would not let this pass. He said, "Fifteen hundred, Jim." He moved his chair out just a little as he spoke.

Bancroft said very deliberately. "It shouldn't come to this, Tom; we shouldn't end up with a difficulty." He looked at that moment very much like a lion showing its teeth.

"All right, then pay me my fifteen hundred."

The big man laughed again and Tom thought, "One day I'll have to stop that damned laugh." Bancroft said, "Don't let your gun hand get nervous, kid. Nobody wants to take a shot at anybody."

Tom saw again Jim standing there, working his rifle so cooly at the three cutters; but he did not flinch. "That's up to you, Jim."

IT WAS a wild moment. Ray sat staring, pale and frozen, from one to the other; utterly surprised at this new side to Tom. Suddenly Bancroft relaxed, shrugged elaborately and continued to pay off. "Why cross guns for a stinking three hundred? Too bad though we couldn't be partners. This place smells of luck to me. It looks like my kind of territory."

Tom sheaved the money, the fifteen hundred dollars, into his palm and thrust it into his pocket. "You can have it, Jim."

So then they sat there and there was very little so say. They were now three different men, separate entities, instead of partners. Tom did not know where Ray stood, but he did not look too happy. Jim Bancroft was picking his teeth with his knife, his eyes thoughtful.

"Well, this ends this partnership," Tom thought and was about to rise, when a pleasant throaty voice arrested him:

"Is everything all right?"

The three of them got halfway out of their seats, but the young woman spread out her hands and gestured them down with a smile. "Don't get up. I'm the proprietor, Miss Martin. Did you like the dinner?"

She was not much over twenty five, tall, dignified, friendly in a manner that yet would never permit uncouthness. Tom recalled now seeing her behind the desk in the lobby as they came in. Bancroft was the first to speak:

"Now I know I'm going to like it here. I didn't know that Ferguson had anything like this to offer. Yes, everything is just fine."

She measured him momentarily with her clear brown eyes. Her smile did not fade. Somehow Tom felt ashamed of Bancroft's remark. He said quietly, "We enjoyed the dinner, Ma'am. It was right good."

"Thank you," she said and made ready to move on toward another table where a couple of friends beckoned her. "Don't forget now to stop at Martin's Hotel whenever you're in Ferguson. We aim to please."

Bancroft stopped her by taking her by the hand. "I'd like to introduce myself and my. . ."

She bowed slightly and gently extracted her hand. "Mr. Bancroft, Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Gunderson," she said with a smile. "I know your names from the register of course." She beckoned at one of the waiters. "Three drinks on the house, Albert."

"Martin?" said Bancroft then slowly, reluctantly to let her depart. "Miss Martin? Haven't I . . ."

Suddenly a puzzled silence descended upon the three men. Tom, staring at the young woman, felt his pulse hammer frantically as he now saw the resemblance.

"Perhaps you know my brother, Ed. He's chief deputy here in town. We own the hotel together . . ."

Ray Gunderson was pulling hard on his beer. Tom felt his knuckles tighten as his nails dug into his palms. Jim Bancroft said in a curious, deflated tone, "No—I don't think I know him . . ."

The waiter at this moment planted the three drinks on the table and Miss Martin moved on. "Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen . . ."

They barely nodded, and sat there staring at the drinks in front of them. "Her brother," said Bancroft at last, some of the color gone from his cheeks, his voice queerly brittle. "Well, I'll be double damned, I will."

Gunderson was twirling his liquor, spilling some of it and saying nothing. Tom looked at Bancroft, his eyes burning in a fever haze. Suddenly an echo of Bancroft's old laugh sounded. He picked up the glass. "Goes to show you—a good man should never take up with anything as low as trail-cutters." And he tossed off the drink.

Tom got to his feet then, without touching the drink. "I need some air," he said, his head swirling. He saw the other grasp his drink and toss that off too. "Take it easy, Kid. Everything is all right."

"I need some air," said Tom and walked out.

He went back to the stable to get his horse; but when he reached for his saddle, decision suddenly left him and he stood there trying to think. He couldn't think clearly, but neither could he ride out of this thing. Somehow it wasn't finished. He went into the nearest saloon and had a couple of drinks. They did no good. He strolled down the street looking at the lights and the people. Turning into a place across from the hotel he stood long at the bar, glancing now and again across the street while he slowly filled up on drinks.

He could see the girl in the lobby once, and after a while Jim Bancroft came out of the bar and stood talking to her, smiling, putting on his best manner.

He remembered her clear, soft brown eyes that yet had so much quiet strength in them. She was smiling up at Bancroft.

The bartender touched his elbow. "What's the matter? You ain't touching your drink. Drink up an' I'll give you one on the house."

Mechanically he drank up and emptied the one the man poured for him. Then suddenly he knew he had enough. His legs wobbled under him but his head was still too clear. "You got any rooms here?" he asked and threw a big bill on the bar. The money was burning his pocket.

"Upstairs—pick six or five."

Tom walked slowly away. "Keep the change."

He awoke the next forenoon with a thundering headache. After a cup of coffee at the Chinaman's next door he went across the street to the hotel to fetch his warbag out of the room he had paid for. When he was passing out through the lobby again, Gertrude Martin came out of the dining room and stopped him. "Sorry to see you leave so soon. Don't you like our place?"

He tried to smile at her. "I like it fine."

"Well, come again and stay longer."

"Maybe I will sometime," he said and went out.

HE STAYED at Rankin's through that week, seeing the sights of the town, gambling a little, drinking and sleeping. He did not want to stay; he could not leave. As for luck, Bancroft had done well. The man whose priority they had undercut arrived in town with a dry and hungry herd. Bancroft talked him into selling for almost half market value since there was no train for shipping; then he made a deal with Baker and sold the herd at a profit, keeping part of it for breeding stock for Ray Gunderson to look after. He was taking up some range outside of town that the banker rented him on shares.

Tom met the two men in the street a week later and Bancroft called to him, "Looks like you made a mistake, Tom. You should have have stuck with your partners."

"Maybe," said Tom. "Maybe not."

Ray Gunderson was just standing there avoiding Tom's glance, looking uncomfortable and somehow lost, like he had eaten a bad meal. Bancroft said: "Thought you were gonna travel on?"

Tom said slowly. "I guess so; when I get ready, Jim." And he turned and walked on, seeing constantly before him Jim's peculiar glance, in which there now seemed to have come a new light.

It was shortly after that, that Ed Martin's saddleless horse drifted back to the home corral and really set the town to talking. Gertrude Martin looked pale and sick and strolled nervously about the hotel, trying to keep a brave face. She and her brother were twins and had always been very close.

Gradually the idea of a search party gathered momentum and Tom Reyonlds, on walking into the lobby of the hotel, came upon Bancroft in the act of organizing it, talking earnestly to the girl. "There's nothing I wouldn't do to help you," Tom heard him say. "You keep your chin up. We'll scour the country till we find him."

Gertrude made a desperate gesture. "I think he's dead, Jim."

"Don't say that. Don't give up hope too quick."

"But his horse . . . Timber would never have come home if Ed was somewhere, alive."

"We'll do what we can, Gertrude. You know me." Bancroft patted her gently on the shoulder and Tom, his gall suddenly rising, turned out of the door to the street.

He came upon Ray, about to mount, to join the search party. Ray looked the other way when Tom approached. "You goin' in on this comedy too, Ray?"

Gunderson's slow face tried to look casual. "Jim thinks it's maybe best . . ." He shrugged.

"You like it?"

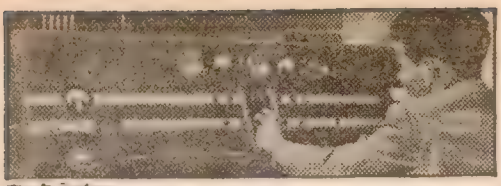
The other said nothing and Tom put a hand on his arm and turned him. "You like it?"

"Maybe not, Tom . . ."

"Then why the hell don't you get out of this—why don't you travel on?"

Ray squirmed, finally said, "Jim's got my money—why don't you move on? You got yours . . ."

He could make no answer to that and walked away. At the corner of the hotel he



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met Bancroft. Bancroft stopped at the sight of him and stood waiting, as if he expected something. Tom said suddenly, "You're a sight that sickens a man, Jim. Some act you're putting on."

"You know what you can do if you don't like it."

Tom knew suddenly what that new look in the other's eyes was; it amazed him; but it was there, burning, hungry, brooking no hindrance. He said slowly, "If I thought you'd make a play for that girl and not tell her . . ."

Bancroft bared his teeth in a chilly, mirthless smile. "Who's to say who killed who, Tom? We were all of us there, weren't we? Whose word is good?"

"The truth has a way with it sometimes."

Suddenly hatred was between them, solid, chill and tangible, like a wave, filling the space from man to man. "By Gad," said Bancroft slowly with hard controlled emotion—why, I should have killed you the night you argued about the money."

Tom heard himself say, his voice cold and brittle. "Have a go at it, Jim."

Bancroft backed away a few paces, considering the situation; he paled a little. Suddenly he laughed, with that false good nature of his. "Forget it, Tom. You'll get over your notions. . . . But, watch your step, Kid. Walk softly . . ."

Tom kept standing, ready for him. "I will," he said. "Don't worry; I'm not the one to tell her; you'll have to do that yourself if you want her that bad."

A crowd spilled out of a dance hall then, across the alley way, and Bancroft turned and went for his horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Crocodile Tears

TWO days later Tom Reynolds, standing at Rankin's bar, and listening to the general talk, became aware that the search party had returned to town, dusty, weary and bedraggled, their horses dead-beat, and that Ray Gunderson was no longer with the group.

He immediately crossed the street and went into the hotel bar; not seeing Ban-

croft there he mounted the stairs and knocked on his former partner's door.

"Who is it?"

Bancroft was sitting on the bed, bottle and glass handy on the chair next him; his six-shooter lying by the pillow. He looked tired, saddleworn, but the dominant sharp eyes had lost none of their lustre as he regarded Tom watchfully. Tom said, "Tired from leading those men on your wild-goose chase?"

Bancroft shrugged and poured himself a drink. "Have one, Tom."

"No; what happened to Ray?"

The other took a swallow before he answered. "Rode on—he was smart; preferred to drift—he was tired of this town." Bancroft kept his eyes brazenly straight in Tom's as he spoke.

Tom Reynold's boot indicated an object under the unoccupied bed. "He left his warbag behind. You're a liar, Jim."

Bancroft chose to say nothing and Tom stood there thinking of poor slow-witted Gunderson; he'd been a good trail partner, a willing and helpful friend; unkind to no one. "I liked Ray," he said slowly. Something cold and terrible and relentless began boiling in him. "You don't get away with this one, Jim. One less who saw you kill Ed Martin, eh? How do you aim to handle me?"

Bancroft laughed softly. "That's up to you—you can get out of this town. I'm doing well here, I'm making money. No one; no one, savvy, stands in my way."

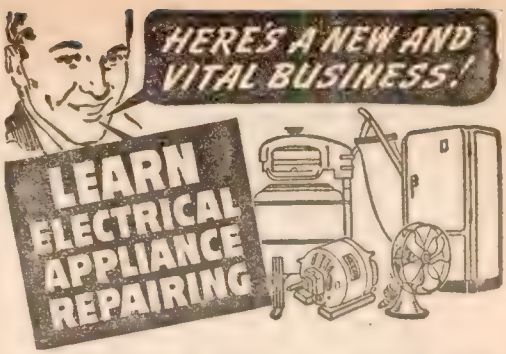
"You call that giving a woman a square deal?"

"You keep her out of this." Bancroft reddened. "What she don't know won't hurt her. Don't you get notions in your head about her either."

"I wouldn't have that much gall; but you tell her, or else get out of town. I'll give you till nine in the morning. Think about it!"

Bancroft was no longer laughing. Tom had never seen him as dead serious as this; from dark red he had gone a weak pale. "Don't get in my way, Kid," he said at last. "Don't get in between me and what I want. So you think you're a fast man with a hog-leg, Tom. I think you're slow."

"Your gun's as handy as mine," said Tom. "Why wait? Why not now?"



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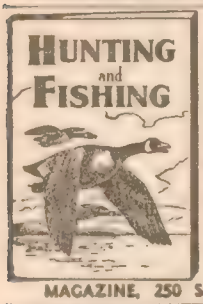

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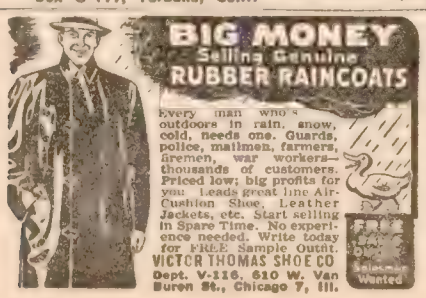
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Bancroft stiffened; his gun hand twitched, almost jumped. Then he said, "I play my cards close, sonny. I'll see you, Tom."

Tom Reynolds backed out of the door, and as he closed it after him, he thought grimly, "I've killed that damned laugh of his anyhow."

At the end of the corridor he almost bumped into Gertrude Martin, busy sorting linen in a closet. She met his glance briefly as he touched his hatbrim and went down the stairs.

HE SPENT a night of moderate drinking, sitting once absentmindedly in a poker game and losing a few dollars. So maybe this was the end of it. One of them would die; maybe both. Perhaps he had been wrong in not riding on—there was always that thought. The trailcutters had been after their beef, and Jim Bancroft had defended it as he knew best—but neither Tom's nor Ray's beef had been stolen—some of it mavericked, but not stolen. Where was the justice of it? He could not find it. And Gertrude Martin? How much did she care for a man like Jim . . . .

He woke up in his room over Rankin's as someone knocked on the door, and he sprang fully clothed to his feet, his pistol in hand. When he removed the chair back from the door knob and stood aside, the door swung open to reveal Jim Bancroft, unarmed, grave-faced. "I want to make talk with you, Tom."

"Talk?" His tone was skeptical, suspicious.

Bancroft still looked worn, almost haggard; the sparkle seemed somewhat gone from his glance. He came in and sat down on a chair. "I've thought it over. I've been weighing this thing in my mind all night . . ."

"I'm listening," said Tom sardonically.

"I guess I'm not good enough for her," said Bancroft suddenly. "I guess you're right about getting out of here—it's no deal for a girl; it's no deal for me. In our business we should just ride on. What happened, has happened, but it's no use hangin' around."

Tom kept watching him intently, curious. This was another, new side to Bancroft. The Leopard, he thought, does not

change its spots. It must damned near kill Jim to put on this act. But he merely said, "Well?"

"I'm willing to ride on if you are Tom."

"I don't care for your company, I guess."

"We'll ride a ways together and then split up. If she ever finds out how her brother died it won't be much good for either of us. We were both there—if either of us drifted back she'd find out."

Tom's face grew hard. He was thinking: "He'll get me out of town a piece and then have a go at me. If he's lucky he can dig me down where I fall and nobody will be the wiser. But let him talk. Maybe I'd like a go at him out there myself . . ."

"What about Ray?" Tom finally asked.

Bancroft looked at him; his eyes were hazy and weary and their look almost raised a doubt in Tom Reynolds' mind. "I didn't kill him Tom. You have to believe that. He rode on. The warbag? Well, he made up his mind sudden an' he didn't have nothing in it he cared much about, just odds and ends . . . . Tom, don't you think a man gets tired of killing sometime?

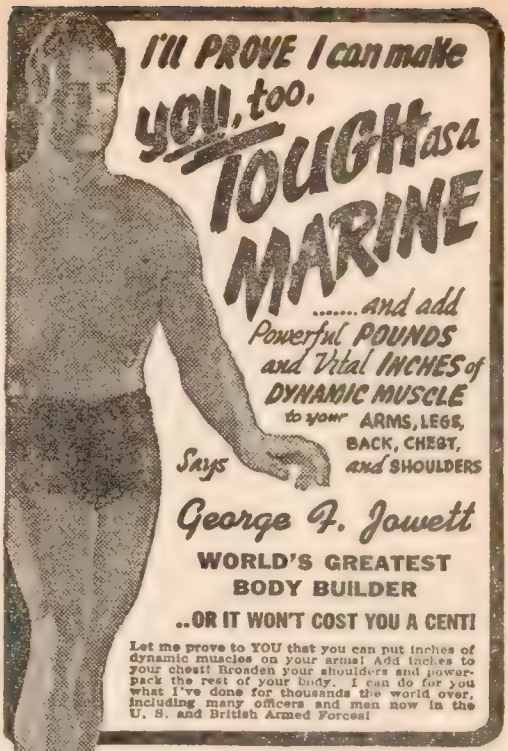
Tom drew the moment out long before he finally said, "I guess so, Jim. I guess so."

"You'll go then?"

Tom nodded and began getting his belongings together. When he was ready Jim took his bedroll while Tom carried the warbag. Bancroft went down the stairs first and Tom paid at the bar. They went out in the crisp morning-quiet and turned up towards Dekker's stable where Bancroft's horse stood, already saddled and packed with bedroll and saddlebags. "The sidewinder," Tom thought, "He was that sure I'd ride with him.

Bancroft's sixgun hung in a cantle strap and his rifle was in the scabbard. "The guns are empty," Jim said. "I carry no shells; you check for yourself. About your own—you can keep them. I'm willing to trust you. Fair enough?"

What was it that old darky had taught him once, Tom pondered, that little verse about the crocodile? "When crocodile he sheds a tear . . . Be mighty careful, death is near." He said, "Fair enough." And quickly checked the weapons. He patted Bancroft's pockets and looked in the sad-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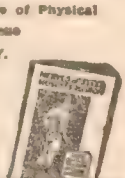

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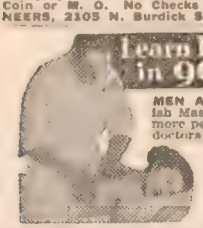

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dlebags. As far as he could see there were no shells. Watching the other's face, doubts came to him again and he even began feeling foolish for his suspicions.

"Does Gertrude Martin know you're pulling out?" he asked.

Bancroft did not meet his glance this time. "We had a talk," he said.

Tom whistled for the hostler, who slept inside the stable portal, and the kid came stumbling out after a moment, to get the saddle, and gear the horse up in the corral. Tom paid him, and the two men mounted and began riding out of town, facing sunup, Bancroft riding to the right of Tom and a little ahead of him.

Miles and hours slid by as they rode in silence, walking their horses leisurely, and Tom sat speculating on this strange journey, on the possible truth in Bancroft's words, that neither of them would have much chance before the law if their knowledge of the death of the three men were ever revealed. Once he asked Bancroft: "Where are you heading?" And the other said, "Thinking of going up Wyoming way. I guess this trail goes there—all right with you?"

"All right," said Tom. "We'll split after another couple of miles or so." And they rode on and his mind kept saying frantically, "What then? What then? That won't end or settle anything. There'll always be the two of us and the girl and those three dead men—and Ray . . ." And he kept riding, warily, alertly, his eyes constantly on Jim Bancroft and his thoughts were not straight at all.

A WHILE later, at the approach to a low, grass covered mesa, the trail divided in two, one running straight east, the other north. Gradually Bancroft's horse came to a slow walk and then halted. The big man turned in the saddle. "Well," he said, "If you want to split, here's as good a place as any—it's up to you."

Tom studied this strange man; this puzzle on horseback, as his own mount stopped and began cropping grass. "All right," he said after a moment. "All right then, Jim."

Bancroft wheeled the horse northward. "Too bad we had to part like this. You don't want to shake hands?"

"We never did; why start now?"

"Okay, Kid. No hard feelings. I'll ride on first." Bancroft waved a hand and moved along a few paces.

Tom sat there feeling a little flat; almost regretting that he had not shaken hands, but shrugging the feeling off.

When they were about thirty yards apart he heard Bancroft say something about ". . . my latigo . . ." and saw him dismount looking at the ring. The horse had veered off the trail a little, seeking the grass and Bancroft was loosening the latigo strap, shifting the cinch a little and then pulling on the strap to make it fast. He was not looking back at Tom Reynolds. Almost done he seemed to notice something on his boot toe. He stamped it once or twice to kick that something off, then bent down to use his hand.

In the next split second he straightened up, the rifle coming out of the grass, the man swinging round and aiming in that fine rhythmic motion, which once seen, Tom had never forgotten.

As he rolled out of the saddle, the second bullet took the horse, tumbling it to the ground, almost fouling Tom's movements and trapping his booted rifle under it. Bancroft was firing carefully, slashing one bullet through the neck of the dying horse, ramming another into a shoulder blade, searching for the man behind the horseflesh.

Tom fired across the saddle with his pistol, seeking for range, then ducked and lay low. He managed to turn and crawl back of the horse's rump and lay there, still, holding his fire, peering under the tail to see Bancroft come slowly, cautiously forward, gun at ready, his face blazing red

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with the excitement, his eyes once more aflame.

Bancroft threw another shot through the soft part of the neck of the animal and then held his fire as he began carefully to circle round the head-end of the horse, keeping about twenty yards away. Tom rolled on his back then and lay waiting, slighting over the shoulder of the carcass till he saw Bancroft's hat. He kicked up on his elbow then and fired.

As he dived farther back of the rump he saw that his bullet had taken the other by the left shoulder and shaken him around. He stood up over the hindlegs then and fired again, and missed, ducked and fired once more as Bancroft, steel-steady, swung down on him.

The rifle bullet sliced his ear and he saw his target stagger and sit down in the grass. As he heard sudden, rapid hoof thunder behind him he got up and ran forward and fired again, and Jim Bancroft, losing the rifle, keeled over to his right and lay still, breathing heavily.

Tom circled a little and walked over and stood on the right sight of Jim Bancroft. There was some blood already showing on his lips and he looked up at Tom with an effort.

"You're a good actor, Jim."

Bancroft said bitterly, bitter at the world and at himself for having failed. "Not good enough—damn—it." He breathed hard a couple of times. "Funny—always figured you were a slow man an' I—could kill—you sure." His voice grew weaker. "Goes to show you—things don't always—work out. An' I was doin' right well." He shook his head and closed his eyes. "Thought you were a slow man, Tom," he said in acid, incredulous regret.

"I guess I was up to now."

Bancroft said suddenly, "Gertrude, Gertrude . . ." and lay still.

Tom Reynolds picked up Ray Gunderson's rifle and stood looking at it, shaking his head, when the rider he had heard, and now remembered hearing, pulled up and dismounted. It was Gertrude Martin.

She stared at Bancroft awhile. At last she said, "I saw it all. I've been trailing you. I stayed awake all night waiting to see what would happen . . ."

"How did you know . . .?"

"I listened at his door last night when you were talking."

"But how did you know . . ."

"When you three came into town—and you quarreled. The way you acted; the way Jim acted—maybe it was what you call woman's instinct. I don't know—Ed rode out with two trailcutters and you three came into town—then what you said about it being no use searching. . . ."

"This is Ray's rifle," said Tom. "Jim planted it here; he planned this all along . . ."

"What happened to Ed?" she demanded. "Tell me now—tell me how it was . . ."

She stood with averted face while he told her reluctantly. Suddenly she began sobbing, her shoulders trembling violently. Not realizing that he was doing it he put an arm about her and she stood crying against his chest till she was exhausted.

Suddenly she looked up. "I haven't cried till now; I couldn't cry till I knew . . ."

He said shortly after, "You better ride on back. I'll take care of this. . . ."

She had calmed down some and was ready to ride. She said from the saddle, "What will you do? Where will you go?"

"I don't know; travel through a while . . ."

Her horse had started but she suddenly wheeled it about and sat looking at him. "After a spell, come back this way, will you, Tom."

He felt something take wings within him, and the weight that had been on him for so long vanished. "Maybe I will," he called after her. "Maybe I will."

THE END

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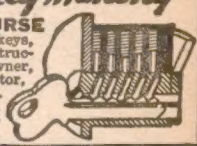

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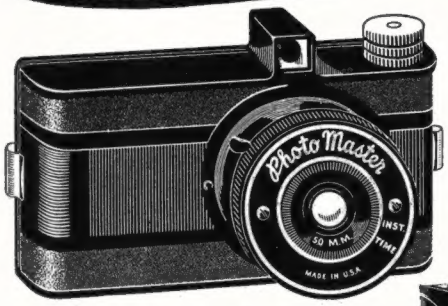

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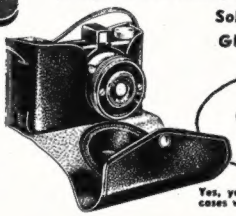

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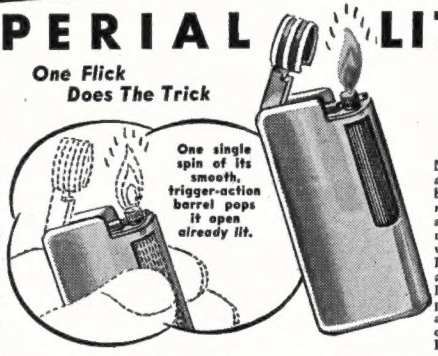

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